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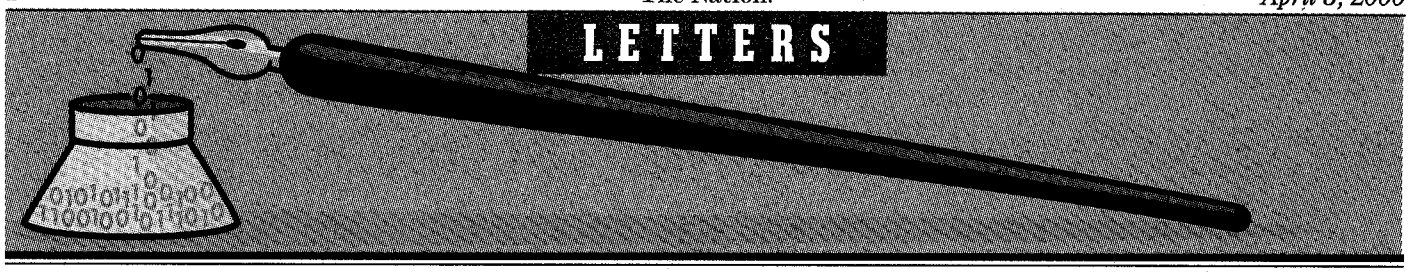

WHAT *ARE* JOURNALISTS FOR?

New York City

■ I enjoyed Carlin Romano's review of my book, *What Are Journalists For?* ["Who Owns the Fourth Estate?" Jan. 24]. His criticisms were fair and unusually thoughtful, given what passes for debate in the mainstream press. One thing struck me as curious, however. Romano makes fun of the opening pages of the book, which quote from a plaque at the National Press Club in Washington titled "The Journalist's Creed." It declares that journalism is a "public trust," journalists are "trustees for the public," to accept "a lesser service than public service is a betrayal of that trust" and so on. Romano says I am guilty of "over-romanticizing" my subject by taking seriously this sort of language.

I wonder about that, just as I wonder about progressive critics who equate mainstream journalism with the "corporate media," as if profit-taking described everything of note within this troubled craft. I grant that the American press has a rather bloated self-image and that its practices often mock the First Amendment rhetoric that justifies them. But just where are we supposed to go for a language that describes what journalists ought to be doing in a democracy? It seems to me that the best starting point is some notion of public service, as against service to the state, the market, the system, the résumé—or, indeed, the profession of journalism itself.

Calling the press a trustee for the public may sound like claptrap to some, boilerplate to others. Romano says that this sort of rhetoric applies to such a narrow slice of journalism that it's all but meaningless. Maybe so. But here's my question: If "journalism" has any distinct presence in American life—distinct from power politics, the media business or stand-up comedy—then which philosophical notions can justify, constrain and elevate the practice or instruct its critics in what's worth criticizing? Where do you go, once you've seen through the sham rhetoric of public service? Carlin, please advise. JAY ROSEN

St. Louis

■ Carlin Romano's review of public journalism guru Jay Rosen's new book was a profound disappointment. Much of the review involved ruminating over the meaning of Rosen's abstract pronouncements on journalism's need to engage people in public life or how there's more than one journalism to be done in the service of democracy.

Rather than spar over abstractions, it would be far more productive and enlightening to look at the actual track record of public journalism experiments. Especially important, given *The Nation*'s tradition of sympathy for labor, is how public journalism has affected the newsroom and working journalists. Some cursory research on your part would have revealed:

§ Management has imposed public journalism from the top down. Consultants come into newsrooms, and reporters are forced to listen to gobbledygook about how they must abandon their watchdog role and their "culture of toughness" and become community-builders.

§ Veteran reporters have been asked to resign and then reapply for jobs on "public life teams" and the like. This kind of humiliation has good reporters leaving public-journalism newsrooms in droves, only to be replaced by inexperienced, malleable cubs ready to be shaped by the evangelists of the movement.

§ In researching my book *The Public Journalism Movement in America*, I ran across numerous public-journalism efforts that backfired in the faces of editors and reporters precisely because they abandoned the old notions of "balance" and "detachment" for some new mission of "making public life go well."

Romano seems to accept Rosen's assertion that public journalism's critics are all New York and Washington media elitists. Not so. Out here in the provinces, the *St. Louis Journalism Review* has been crusading against the "change agents," and the nonsense they promote, since1995. DON H. CORRIGAN

ROMANO REPLIES

Bennington, Vt.

■ The short answer to Jay Rosen's request for philosophical guideposts at the end of his typically generous letter is: truth and beauty. I revere many journalists devoted to public service, but I also like journalists committed to nervy navel-gazing, wry explanation of recherché subjects and pure eccentric fun. Rosen thinks a great deal about capital-J "Journalism" and its obligations. I, a nominalist at heart, think more about small-j journalists—their idiosyncratic personalities and vanities, their private dreams and frequently modest accomplishments. The difference between us—an honorable one, I'd say—is that he thinks calling a practice "journalism" ought to imply some uniformly shared goal among the practitioners, e.g., public service. I don't.

I thank Don Corrigan for finding my review "profound." The scenarios he describes don't resemble anything I've seen in my twenty years on daily newspapers. They strike me as overly hostile exaggerations or aberrations.

CARLIN ROMANO

DOWN-EASTER AS 'NOBLE SAVAGE'?

Searsmont, Me.

■ Both Frederick Wiseman's latest film, *Belfast, Maine*, and Stuart Klawans's review of it have missed an opportunity to learn from our community's experience ["Films," Feb. 14]. I have no quarrel with the way Wiseman has treated what he chose to depict—what I saw in the film rings fairly true to my experience of the people and things he shows. But both Wiseman and Klawans have consigned Belfast's largest employer to a mere passing notice. According to the *Maine Sunday Telegram* (November 21, 1999) the credit card giant MBNA not only exercises a central influence on local and state politics, its executives and their spouses presented a bundle of contributions to the campaign of George W. Bush second only to that from a Houston law firm in the first nine months of last year. MBNA is much more than what Klawans refers to as "Belfast's one outpost of the so-called New Economy"—it is one of the cornerstones on which that house of cards is built.

I don't doubt that Wiseman intended to make a film that, as Klawans puts it, "quietly but devastatingly reveals the wounds inflicted" by the new economy, and I applaud the desire not to let such wounds go unseen in our rush to embrace Social Darwinism *nouvelle*—there are moments where Wiseman's compassionate treatment of his subjects moves me profoundly. I'm afraid, however, that by failing to recognize or address some of the most important and complex aspects of our community, Wiseman and Klawans run the risk of turning the residents of Belfast into updated versions of the Noble Savage. If Belfast, Maine, is reduced to such a stereotype, much of the value of Wiseman's brilliantly empathic eye is lost.

CHRISTOPHER LYMAN

YOUTH FIGHT HOMOPHOBIA

San Rafael, Calif.

■ Thank you for Doug Ireland's "Gay Teens Fight Back" [Jan. 31]. At the Youth Leadership Institute, we have the privilege of seeing young people take positive action on a daily basis. The Marin County Youth Commission is a group of twenty young people, appointed by our Board of Supervisors, which took a stand against homophobia by passing a resolution in support of gay-straight alliances in high schools. The Youth Leadership Institute's Marin County Youth Grants Board is a group of six youths and two adults who award grants to youth-run projects. Last year it funded a Gay-Straight Alliance at a local high school to educate the

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The China Deal

The fierce debate over China's entry into the World Trade Organization needs a field guide. The birds of a feather flocking to it are bizarre. To end annual Congressional review of China's trade status, a key part of the deal, the Fortune 500 companies have joined the Democratic President to the Republican Congressional leaders who tried to impeach him. In opposition, the internationalist Seattle coalition of labor, students and environmental, consumer and human rights activists are joined by unregenerate cold warriors and xenophobes like Pat Buchanan.

There isn't even agreement on what the fight is about. The President and the cold warriors seem intent on replaying the old debate about whether we should engage or isolate China. But that's a dead letter. We're running a $70 billion annual trade deficit with China. It receives far more foreign direct investment than any other developing country. Trade, investment and reform will continue whether China enters the WTO or not. The question isn't whether to engage China; it's what the terms of that engagement will be.

Even for this White House the gulf between rhetoric and reality is striking. President Clinton is trying to sell this as a trade deal that's good for America and also as a historic reform that will endow China with the blessings of liberty. The trade claims are exaggerated and disingenuous. Every trade deal of the past decade has been hailed as opening China's markets, even as the trade deficit has skyrocketed. The most detailed Administration estimate by the International Trade Commission assumes generously that our exports to China will rise faster than our imports under this deal; even so, it projects a possible doubling of the trade deficit to more than $130 billion a year in the next ten years.

In fact, the Chinese leaders have no intention of surrendering control over their markets—nor should they. For example, the Administration is making a big play for the farm vote by claiming the agreement will open up a market of 1.2 billion people for US farmers. Don't bet the farm on that. The Chinese are sensibly intent on self-sufficiency in agriculture and today sell us more produce than they buy from us. With millions of unemployed peasants in the cities, the last thing China needs is to have millions more displaced by a flood of imports from massively subsidized US agribusinesses. Moreover, contrary to the President's claims, even if China enters the WTO without US support, our bilateral treaties with China guarantee that we will get the same treatment as our competitors. And as the purchaser of up to 40 percent of Chinese exports, we surely have the clout to insist on it.

The President also claims that the deal will foster dramatic change in China, for it will "import one of democracy's most cherished values—economic freedom." In fact, the Chinese leaders are in difficult straits, seeking to attract foreign capital and open up globally competitive factories while slowly dismantling state industries and subsidies. Inevitably, tens of millions of workers are going to lose their jobs in a country in which the safety net has been provided mainly by the enterprises that are being dismantled. Surely one reason that the Chinese leadership wants the deal—and

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the waiver of annual review of their trading status—is to reassure foreign investors that no matter how horrific the upheaval, access to Western markets is guaranteed. And they can lay the blame for the most disruptive reforms on the WTO and foreign capitalists.

Clinton paints the global corporations as philanthropic agents of democracy, but they are unlikely champions of freedom. They prefer order to democracy, powerless workers to organized ones, self-regulation to environmental and consumer protections. China attracts investment primarily as an export platform with cheap, disciplined labor, where union organizers are immediately clapped in jail and worker protests are squelched. The President says he wants to avoid a race to the bottom in the global economy, but bringing China into the WTO and waiving annual review of its trading status is like firing the starter's gun. Asia's fragile democracies—Thailand, the Philippines, Korea, where workers have the right to organize—will find China setting the competitive floor on everything from salaries to environmental despoliation.

In the end, the debate isn't about trade benefits or about China's internal reforms. It's a choice between the past and the future. The China deal is part of the past, the militant campaign of the past twenty-five years by global corporations and banks seeking to break down regulation, weaken labor unions, sweep away socialist and social democratic regimes, and forge an unregulated global economy. Their success has generated growth, but also growing inequality, increasing instability, environmental destruction and a return of the satanic mills of a bygone day. The challenge of the future is carried by the Seattle coalition that seeks to create the rules—at national and global levels—that empower workers, protect the environment and consumers, and make this global economy work for the many, not just the few.

If Clinton were serious about meeting that challenge rather than furthering the goals of global corporations, he would continue to engage China—expanding trade through already established channels while pushing arms control and encouraging reforms. He would also work to give struggling democracies that protect independent worker movements preferential access to our markets over authoritarian regimes that repress free association. His priority would be to bring workers' rights and environmental protections into the global trading system, not to usher in China and impede progress on those issues. Without such leadership, the Seattle coalition—the best hope for progressive change to emerge in decades—has little choice but to oppose the corporate agenda until those in power hear the voices of the growing movement for democracy. That, in the end, is what the China vote is about.

Times+Trib=Bad News

At least you could say of the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times* under their respective patriarchs, Col. Bertie McCormick and Gen. Harrison Gray Otis, that they stood for something—even if it was rising real estate values and right-wing Republicanism. We are not shedding tears for those dear old days—after all, the *Times* jumped into bed with the developers and the *Trib*'s isolationist voice suffocated Chicagoland and much

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of the Midwest. But in our own day the acquisition of the Times Mirror Company by the Tribune Company threatens further to flatten the contours of the media landscape.

The $6.45 billion deal, if approved by the Justice Department and the Federal Communications Commission, will create a media behemoth comprising eleven daily newspapers, twenty-two television stations, four radio stations and a baseball team. Although the two media corporations are primarily newspaper-based, with the Tribune Company more active in other sectors like broadcasting and the Internet, this merger is a long way from the objectives that drove the barons who founded them. Nowadays, the putatively conservative types who run the Trib company, with their multimillion-dollar stock options and golden parachutes, speak the new Nasdaqese of "synergy," "cross-marketing," "e-commerce platforms," "corporate footprints." As Trib Company CEO John Madigan summed up: "We'll have a major presence in the three largest markets in the United States, and that presence will be defined by taking what are essentially local-market media companies and putting them together into a national footprint."

The Colonel and the General would probably have greeted that with a string of choice profanities. They were driven by personal goals that included wealth and political power but that also included civic pride. When the Otis and Chandler family descendants sidestepped the provision in the family trust requiring that the paper remain independent so they could sell the *Times*, they revealed that they were motivated solely by money.

They had already all but abandoned any sense of "family trust" in the broader sense when they turned the paper over to Mark Willes, former vice chairman of General Mills, to do for it what he did for cereals. Under his stewardship company stock price went up, which is what he was hired to do. Willes, known unaffectionately in the newsroom as "Cap'n Crunch," crusaded to break down the barriers between the business and the news sides. He also slashed staff and shut down community editions of the *Times* aimed at the inner city while courting bilingual middle-class readers and pumping money into supplements serving the upscale Westside. All this culminated in the Staples Center scandal, in which the fire wall between business and news was dynamited.

Despite all that, the *Times* still provides some solid local coverage, currently of the Rampart division police scandal, and its reporters and readers may well fear further cost-cutting and fluffing up under the Tribune Company, a notorious union-buster. The company's corporate goal of weaving news, television programming and Internet operations into a seamless cocoon of synergy points the way for the paper to become a bland, rootless "content provider" for Internet and TV. The Tribune Company has ambitions of becoming an entertainment powerhouse (it has already given the world *Geraldo* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), which raises the long-term worst-case scenario of more entertainment, less reporting.

In terms of social policy the merger could be the final blow to the FCC's already battered cross-ownership rule, which bars a newspaper from possessing a TV station in the same city. The Tribune Company, which now owns newspapers and TV stations in Los Angeles, New York and Hartford, can be counted on to send waves of lobbyists over the top against the rule. They must be resisted by friends of the rule in Congress. The rule should be upheld because of the protection it offers to smaller communities against dominance by single companies.

An even greater danger is posed by the accelerating media merger wave—most egregious, America Online's buyout of Time Warner—of which the Times-Trib marriage is yet another example. Taken on its own, it will probably pass muster under traditional antitrust criteria of not diminishing competition in any specific market or resulting in a near-term rise in prices. But the media merger mania feeds on itself and, unchecked, threatens to leave the country with four or five giant media companies dominating the selection and flow of information. There is a pressing political need to make a distinction between industrial mergers, judged by their impact on prices and competition, and media mergers, where society's objective should be to insure a democratic dissonance of voices. Congress has shown a reluctance to tangle with the big media companies, particularly in an election year. All the more reason to raise our voices against this merger.

Honor the Blacklistees

After last year's brouhaha surrounding the presentation by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences of a Lifetime Achievement Award to Elia Kazan, one member of the academy had an idea. Samuel Gelfman, a literary and theatrical consultant and a member of the academy's producers branch, contacted its president, Robert Rehme, and made a suggestion: Next time around why not devote a segment of the evening to the blacklist?

The proposal was not received with glee. In a December 28, 1999, letter to the officers and governors of the academy Gelfman reported, "As several of you—to whom I spoke earlier—know, when I suggested the idea to Bob Rehme, he explained that the Academy's policy is to remain totally non-political and, after last year's events, any mention of the motion picture industry cooperation with the House Unamerican Activities Committee constitutes a political statement."

Gelfman respectfully demurred: "In a millennial overview of our industry's first hundred years, the political climate that led to the Black List and the exclusion of these awards [to blacklistees] from public mention is a legitimate part of our history." He might have added that the academy, which had collaborated with the blacklist system in the first place, had already made its political statement. The question now is whether to revise that statement to let the public know that it regrets this stain on its institutional history.

The academy's desire to avoid recriminations about something that happened half a century ago is understandable, if not particularly admirable. But lest the academy forget, when those who were called went to prison, lost their jobs, were blacklisted and/or denied their screen credits—all for refusing to cooperate with opportunistic Congressional investigating committees—they were not protecting themselves. By resisting the demand that they confess, recant, inform, sign loyalty oaths, they were the latest in a long line of men and women down through the centuries who

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EDITORIALS

have been pressured by church and state to declare their allegiance to God and king (or, in the seventeenth century, official science, which held that the earth is at the center of the universe). Most of those who refused to bow to such pressures did so as a matter of conscience.

Back in the days of the domestic cold war it was part of the civic religion, the official mythology, to deny the existence of the blacklist. Indeed, as late as 1980 when Ronald Reagan ran for President he told journalist Robert Scheer that "there was no such thing as a blacklist in Hollywood." The academy knows better, and surely fifty years later, it's time to set the record straight.

As a general proposition it doesn't pay for outsiders to advise membership organizations on how to conduct their business. But where the academy is concerned, we are more than outsiders. We go to the movies. We stay home and watch the Oscars. We are the audience, the customer, and as such, while we may not always be right, we deserve to be heard.

Gelfman has proposed that the academy fill in some missing history. We suggest that it go him one better. Here, members of the academy, is our idea. Why not instruct your branch representatives on the board at their next meeting to pass a simple resolution honoring the anonymous blacklistees, those who were denied work and recognition at the time? The question is not whether such a resolution may constitute a political statement. It's the decent thing to do. VICTOR NAVASKY

Keep Out of Colombia

With appeals to party unity, President Clinton has set his sights on a political feat that a Republican in today's White House could only dream of. He hopes to convince Congress—and Democrats in particular—to throw its support behind the most repressive military in Latin America, in a massive, multiyear commitment to the unwinnable forty-year civil war in Colombia.

The Administration, backed by the Republican leadership, is pressing to add $1.6 billion over two years in police and military aid to a Colombia program that has exploded from $62 million to $361 million since 1996. The strategy's centerpiece is to create three antidrug battalions in the Colombian Army. Backed by US Special Forces training, guided by US intelligence, armed with more than sixty sophisticated US helicopters, they will be deployed in the southern provinces of Putumayo and Caquetá to help eradicate coca plants grown by thousands of peasants. The futility of spending billions on eradication should be obvious to lawmakers familiar with studies by their own General Accounting Office. Coca is so profitable and easy to grow that short-term success at eradication has always proven an empty victory. Like mercury hit with a hammer, coca cultivation attacked in a given location simply scatters elsewhere.

The new "southern Colombia" strategy, however, is not just futile but truly dangerous. The powerful FARC insurgency operates as a virtual government in the region. It taxes economic activity, including the drug trade, and protects peasant growers. Rather than test the FARC's stated interest in fostering alternative crops to coca—on March 9 the Administration opposed an amendment in Congress to add funding for the United Nations' alternative development efforts in the area—the Clinton strategy is to help the Colombian Army "secure" the area for eradication by police forces. For the United States this means entering a long-time civil war, most of whose victims—tens of thousands killed, over a million displaced—are civilians.

Officially, Washington's target is drug production. But many backers of the proposal assign it counterinsurgency objectives as well. By bloodying the FARC, they hope to limit the guerrillas' threat to the government and weaken their position at the negotiating table. The best route toward peace, drug czar Gen. Barry McCaffrey told Congress recently, is to confront the rebels with force.

The counterinsurgency strategy, however, is no more likely to succeed than the counternarcotics plan. The guerrillas are well financed and well entrenched. Intensifying eradication against thousands of coca growers will only create new guerrilla recruits. Although there are no plans to send in US combat troops, more than 200 advisers are already on the ground, and in the words of Representative David Obey there "could be a confluence of events that could lead to" additional US troops going in.

Even without ground troops, the Clinton plan offers a US embrace to a brutal and corrupt military that often works hand-in-glove with right-wing paramilitary groups (some 5,000 to 7,000 fighters) who are themselves deeply implicated in the drug trade, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration.

The Colombian guerrillas are no angels: They kidnap and kill civilians and violate the rules of war. But according to the Colombian Commission of Jurists, nearly 80 percent of the 3,000 civilians who die in political violence each year—union and peasant leaders, teachers, healthcare and human rights workers—are now killed by the paramilitaries.

In the end, Colombia's political violence and expanding drug production can be addressed only in the context of a negotiated end to the war. President Andrés Pastrana has staked his admin-

CALVIN TRILLIN

THE OUTCOME OF THE PRIMARIES

So after the excitement fades,
We end up with the norm:
Both candidates are regulars
Who say they're for reform.

Well, maybe both have seen the light
And understand now why
The flow of money must be stanched.
And maybe pigs can fly.

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istration's future on negotiations. Millions of Colombians have taken to the streets, demanding an end to the violence. Peace talks, although fitful, are more promising now than they have been in a decade. Currently, one of the main stumbling blocks is the continuing brutality and repression of the paramilitaries. Ironically, by strengthening the military (most of whose leaders oppose the peace process) and ignoring the paramilitaries, the Clinton plan is likely to fuel the war and repression and dim the prospects for peace.

Human rights groups are mounting a vigorous fight against the plan. On March 8 twenty religious groups, including the National Council of Churches, urged its defeat. The AFL-CIO has warned against deeper military engagement. In the first legislative skirmish, Representatives Obey, Nancy Pelosi, José Serrano, Nita Lowey and others tried unsuccessfully to take the plan off the legislative fast-track. Representatives like Jim McGovern, Jan Schakowsky and Tom Campbell are educating their colleagues about the dangers ahead. Senators Patrick Leahy and Edward Kennedy want strong human rights conditions placed on US assistance. But too many Democrats are reluctant to abandon their President—particularly as he waves the popular drug-war banner in an election year. If they follow this pied piper into the Colombian quagmire—to the tune of billions of wasted dollars and thousands of lost lives—they will be held responsible for this policy failure and moral disaster for years. How tragic for those Democrats who have been proud to proclaim their party a champion of negotiations, peace and human rights.

KENNETH SHARPE AND BILL SPENCER

Kenneth Sharpe, professor of political science at Swarthmore College, is co-author of Drug War Politics: The Price of Denial *(California). Bill Spencer is deputy director of the Washington Office on Latin America.*

NATION NOTES

Research support for this special Hollywood issue was provided by a grant from the Investigative Fund of The Nation Institute.

In Fact...

CANCEL THOSE VOUCHERS

In the most sweeping legal assessment of school vouchers yet, a Florida judge ruled on March 14 that Governor Jeb Bush's much-touted private-school subsidy plan violates the state Constitution. Judge L. Ralph Smith Jr. said the Bush plan "supplants the system of free public schools" mandated by Florida's Constitution. Under the Bush plan—the model for a national proposal floated by brother George W.'s presidential campaign—students at schools with low average scores on standardized tests receive vouchers for private or parochial school tuition. Since twenty-five states are considering voucher programs, Judge Smith's ruling has broad national implications. It's only the latest setback for voguish education chits, following court challenges on church-state grounds in Ohio, Maine, Pennsylvania and Vermont. Milwaukee's voucher program has survived but faces higher court tests. Florida's program is notable because it combines vouchers with standardized mastery tests, themselves controversial measures of educational success.

RONNIE'S ARMY

Rachel Brown writes: On March 13, charges against Ronnie Dugger of illegally "parading, demonstrating, or picketing" in the Capitol were dropped. Dugger, a crusading journalist and founder of the Alliance for Democracy, was one of several Democracy Brigade activists who last October entered the Capitol Rotunda, recited "A Citizens Address to Congress," calling for public financing of campaigns and unfurled a twenty-five-foot black banner that read, STOP CRIMES AGAINST DEMOCRACY: END CAMPAIGN FINANCE CORRUPTION NOW. Nine demonstrators were arrested. Dugger, who pleaded not guilty, was dismissed by the prosecution because he neither spoke nor held the banner during the protest. Six demonstrators pleaded guilty and were fined $50. Two others still face the possibility of a six-month jail sentence and a $500 fine. According to the alliance, the Capitol demo marked the first use of nonviolent civil disobedience to protest Congress's inaction on campaign finance reform. Three similar protests have been staged in the Capitol since October. Another, co-sponsored by the Rainforest Action Network, will take place on April 20 in conjunction with Earth Day.

FOR A MORATORIUM

Public sentiment against the death penalty is gathering momentum. Baltimore and Pittsburgh are the latest large cities to call for a moratorium on executions. These calls were sparked by the moratorium declared in Illinois by GOP Governor George Ryan after thirteen death row inmates were found to have been wrongly convicted of murder. More than 700 national and local groups, city councils and faith communities have publicly demanded a halt to executions, citing concerns about incompetent counsel and class and race bias. For regularly updated information on scheduled executions, go to www.thenation.com.

AETNA—NOT GLAD WE MET YA

Restitution for slavery (see Randall Robinson, "Reparations for Blacks," March 13) moved another step toward reality with Aetna's acknowledgment that it is considering how to make amends for having sold life insurance policies on slaves in the 1850s. "By insuring the lives of human beings in the way that we insure industrial machinery, Aetna profited from this crime against humanity," said Deadria Farmer-Paellmann, a lawyer who is pushing Aetna and other corporations to offer compensation for their actions. We hope for speedy action—this claim is long overdue.

NEWS OF THE WEAK IN REVIEW

As Katha Pollitt notes in her column this week, repentance is in the air. In addition to the Catholic Church and others on her list, we could add to the people on the secular level vying for absolution: Aetna (see above), John Rocker (for racist remarks about New York City), *The New England Journal of Medicine* (for publishing studies by doctors with ties to the drug industry) and Al Gore, who's hoping voters will forgive him for those White House phone calls and that Buddhist temple excursion. To forestall GOP sanctimony if not divine retribution, he has been proclaiming that he repents (amen, brother!) and enthusiastically supports campaign finance reform (hallelujah!). To give an idea of how *really* guilty he feels, in an interview with the *New York Times*, he used the word "mistake" sixteen times.

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THE BEAT

POLLEY-TICS: "If you're not interested in hockey or politics don't bother reading this," begins the latest missive from Canadian-born actress **Sarah Polley.** Hollywood's most passionate fan of the Toronto Maple Leafs and socialism took time from filming *Kingdom Come* in Alberta to bash that Canadian province's "insane right-wing government" for slashing social services. For the 20-year-old star of *The Sweet Hereafter*, *Go*, *Guinevere* and a growing list of big-budget and independent films, politics is not a spectator sport. As a Canadian child star, she refused to remove an anti–Gulf War peace symbol during a meeting with Disney execs. An activist on the left wing of Canada's New Democratic Party, she joined the **Ontario Coalition Against Poverty**'s fight to block cuts in social spending and in 1996 lost two teeth when activists clashed with police. Polley now spends much of her time in Hollywood but prefers Toronto. "What I thought would happen is that there would be this awful reaction when I was in Hollywood over my political beliefs," she complains. "Instead, they've sort of adopted it as this cute little gimmick. I just think they don't take it very seriously and they make it part of the story. 'Oh, isn't that cute? She got a couple of teeth knocked out.'... It's very insulting because it's not a gimmick. Obviously, I'd pick a more marketable one if it was."... Polley's active with **Artists Against Racism**, the cross-border group founded in 1992 by Canadian journalist **Lisa Cherniak**, which also draws backing from actors **Dan Aykroyd**, **Mike Myers**, **Graham Greene**; directors **Norman Jewison**, **Atom Egoyan**; musicians **Sarah McLachlan**, **k.d. lang**.

OFF THE RESERVATION: Activist author **Sherman Alexie** turned his short story of Indian life, "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," into the screenplay for the 1998 film *Smoke Signals*. Despite frustrations with that project—"Studios would say, 'Do you think we could make these characters white?'"—Alexie now wants to make a film of his novel *Reservation Blues*. "I'm back to square one. I get questions like: 'How come your Indians talk so much? Aren't they supposed to be silent?'" says Alexie, adding, "All the crap you hear about the movie business is true.... They're not necessarily more evil than people in other industries.... But you just expect more from art." Why bother? "I have a serious social agenda. I want to reach a lot of people, and movies are much more egalitarian than books." In February Alexie headlined a Seattle reading to benefit **Save Our Wild Salmon Coalition**, which seeks to dismantle dams and restore salmon to the Columbia/Snake River system.

CAMPUS PROTESTS: Law students under arrest? That's the story at the University of California Law School, where protesters seek to restore diversity. After Proposition 209 restricted affirmative action, UCLAW went from a 1994 first-year class that included forty-six African-Americans and fifty-seven Latinos to a 1999 first-year class with two African-Americans and seventeen Latinos. The UCLAW **Coalition to Prevent Resegregation**—which includes students, faculty and alumni—has battled to get the administration to address the fact that UCLAW admits the lowest proportion of African-Americans and Latinos of all UC law schools. "We spent two years trying to work through the standard channels. We just didn't see any progress," says **Susanne Blossom**, a second-year law student who was arrested. After a rally featuring California Assembly Speaker **Antonio Villaraigosa**, twelve students locked themselves in the school's records office. Hundreds of students lined a hallway chanting "UC Regents—We See Racists!" as police led handcuffed students away. "We realized there was no reason for the administration to change policies if it was comfortable," says Blossom. "We decided to make them uncomfortable."... At Baltimore's Johns Hopkins University, students scuffled with campus security during a protest against low-wage subcontracting by the university's hospital. Hopkins has contracted with a laundry that pays $5.15 an hour and has resisted organizing by the **Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE)**. Students marched on the administration with religious leaders, including Bishop **Douglas Miles**, a Hopkins alumnus and **Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development** activist, who played a key role in passage of that city's living-wage ordinance.... Elsewhere, the campus struggle to insure that clothing with school logos isn't made in sweatshops got a boost when Duke University withdrew rights from twenty-eight companies to manufacture apparel with the university's logo because the companies wouldn't disclose their factories' locations.

DOWN ON THE FARM: In February a 28-year-old upstate New York dairy farmer shot himself dead after opening his milk payment check. Suicide has become the No. 1 unnatural cause of death for farmers, as prices for milk and other commodities have collapsed under pressure from federal farm policies that favor agribusiness and punish family farmers. "We're in a fight over who will control production of our food in this country, and family farmers are the casualties," says American Raw Milk Producers Association president **Joel Greeno**, a leader of the militant **Dairy Action 2000** campaign. Farmers in New York, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and other states are confronting agribusiness with rallies outside processing plants. Signs on farm-country mailboxes declare, "USDA dairy policies destroy farm families." Farmers will challenge Congress during a March 20–21 **Rally for Rural America** in Washington, DC, organized by thirty farm and religious groups. "This is going to be viewed by historians as a vitally important step for change in farm policy," says Senator **Paul Wellstone**.... Linking the farm crisis and trade policy, the nation's second-largest farm group, the **National Farmers Union**, has voted to oppose permanent normal relations with China. ■

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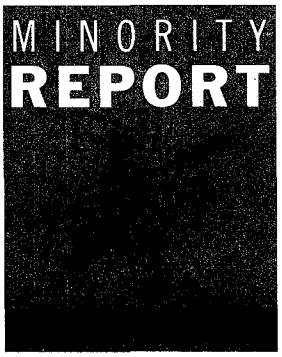
CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

Partition in Mitrovica



Mitrovica, Kosovo

Of this strikingly drab and morose town, few alleviating things can be said except that a river runs through it. Unfortunately, the River Ibar is becoming less of a relief than a part of the difficulty; its main bridge is taking on all the aspects of a partition line. Surly French soldiers police a narrow gap between coils of wire and sometimes act as the travel agent for those expelled from either zone. Not for the first time in this region, "humanitarian" or "peacekeeping" forces act as the accomplices of ethnic cleansing.

Just by the bridge on the Albanian side I found a family of women—mother, aunt and daughter—living in a tent provided by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. The burned-out site had been their family home before the Serbian onslaught of last year; the women were then sheltered by some Serb neighbors during the Milosevic pogrom, emerging when NATO retook the city and reclaiming a family apartment just on the northern side of the river. From this apartment—which they could still see from their tent—they were forcibly expelled by Serb extremists on February 13 of this year while the French soldiers looked on. Dr. Kimete Zabergja, a professor of chemistry, told me the sort of story that practically any Kosovar family can relate: ten years of military and police occupation and enforced segregation, her daughter Flora forced to attend unofficial school in a basement, all professions closed to Albanians, her husband beaten to death by Serbian cops, dispossession and deportation, one lucky relative overseas who sends remittances. "Yugoslavia is finished," she said. "Now even the Montenegrins want to leave. But we were protected by Serb friends during the fighting, and I want my neighbors and all who haven't committed crimes to stay in Kosovo."

This was heartening in its fashion, so I decided to cross the bridge and see if I could get into a conversation on the Serbian side. No such luck. As soon as I set my foot on the other bank—the site of an old mosque that had been demolished as a matter of course—a posse of amazingly hostile thugs was all around me. Hissing and spitting at me, and yelling into their Motorola phones for reinforcements, they wouldn't let a word be uttered, and shoved me back toward the frontier post. Heavily armed French soldiers gazed indifferently, before sauntering over and bidding me do as the gang desired. There may be many Serbs in Mitrovica who would have been willing to share a cup of coffee or a slivovitz, but I wasn't going to be allowed access to them. My spunky Albanian translator was quite willing to try her fluent Serbo-Croatian, but she didn't get the chance. The French officer, when asked if he saw it as his job as *gardien de paix* to pass on orders given by lawless intimidators, gave an eloquent shrug.

French policy in the region has always been openly pro-Belgrade, but the ceding of power at the bridge is a microcosm of an emerging calamity. The mini-partition of Mitrovica is absurd and inhuman in itself—the Serbian cemetery is on the Albanian "side," for example, and vice versa—but other absurdities and inhumanities radiate outward from it. Milosevic hopes to keep the industrial area and the rich mines that go with the town and to split Kosovo in two, while continuing to hold Montenegro hostage (and also holding some thousands of Kosovar prisoners, including the celebrated pediatrician Dr. Flora Brovina, hostage in Serbian jails). NATO colludes in this by insisting on the "territorial integrity" of "Federal Yugoslavia"—a fictional state with no voluntary non-Serb adherents.

More important, and less well understood, is that if the West accepts fascists and cleansers as the interlocutors on the Serbian side, it will find plenty of takers on the Albanian side as well. "Fascist" was actually the term used by Veton Surroi, editor of the main Kosovar daily, *Koha Ditore*, for those Albanians who launched reprisal killings of Serbs after the war. When I spoke to him, he was in no mood to dilute what he'd said. But as he pointed out, partition can only lead to renewed demands for a Greater Albania. And already, on the eastern frontier of Kosovo, there are guerrillas ready and able to carry the war into the cluster of Albanian-majority towns over the Serbian border. Not only that; a partition of Kosovo would automatically ignite demands by Albanian irredentists for a division of Macedonia.

A few days after my brush with those Serbian beauties, I stood on a freezing nighttime hillside near Prekac as the Jashari clan commemorated its dead. More than fifty of the family had been killed two years ago in battle with the then-dominant Serbian forces, and a wedding for one of the survivors was part of the anniversary ceremony. Tens of thousands of villagers had gathered, the graves were heaped with wreaths, bonfires were lit for miles around and folkloric songs were amplified through an immense sound system. I was several times deafened by volleys of fire that tore at the heavens from the massed Kalashnikovs, and was once sprayed with spent cartridges as an enthusiast emptied his revolver clip at the moon. It was like *Braveheart* with automatic weapons. There appeared to be no shortage of ammunition. As the emcee announced that the happy couple would now pass their first night together, a tumescent crowd became orgasmic with volley after volley, redeeming and renewing the depleted Jashari name. There is no conceivable way that this population will ever again lie down under Belgrade rule.

Back in the capital of Pristina, I found that the civil-society types and the intellectuals were slightly embarrassed by my account of the KLA nuptial. Their whole ambition is to leave backwardness and sectarianism behind and to become European and modern. But Europe seems less enthusiastic about them, and the Clinton Administration wants a tame, compromised Kosovo for an election year. If the secular Kosovar democrats are betrayed and abandoned for a short-term calculation, then at least I can say that I have already seen the future. ■

This is the first of two articles.

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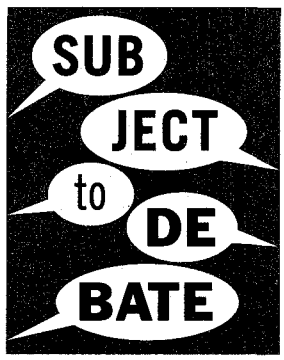
KATHA POLLITT

Regrets Only



On March 12, the first Sunday in Lent, Pope John Paul II apologized to God for assorted bad things done in the name of the church over the past 2,000 years. Although he employed carefully vague language, he seemed to be saying that he was sorry about, *inter alia*, the Crusades, the Inquisition, forcible conversions in South America and Africa and the denial of equal rights to women, "who are all too often humiliated and marginalized." This marks something like the ninety-fifth time the Pope has said he was sorry for acts performed in the name of Catholicism—he has apologized for the hard time Galileo got for saying the Earth goes around the Sun, and recently he regretted the burning at the stake in 1600 of Giordano Bruno, who, he nonetheless reminded the world, really was a heretic. For John Paul, being the Pope means always having to say you're sorry.

And yet, as so often with apologies ("if anyone was offended, that was not my intention"), what is given with one hand is taken back with the other. For many, the big news was that once again the Pope failed to acknowledge the silence of Pope Pius XII in the face of the Holocaust. "Until he comes to terms with that, everything is cosmetic," the novelist Mary Gordon told me. True, the Pope was apologizing on behalf of "sons and daughters of the church," not the church as an institution. But who are these sons and daughters the Pope has in mind if not the bishops, cardinals and popes who preceded him? Whether in the twelfth century or the twentieth, Sicilian marketwomen and Irish farmers and Bavarian housewives had little power to forward or retard the great evils to which the Pope alluded. By blaming the people, as if the church were a town meeting in which everyone gets one vote, John Paul II has taken the hard-won democratic reforms achieved by Vatican II and used them to avoid institutional responsibility: When everyone's equally at fault, nobody really is.

Some have suggested his reticence was intended to preserve the distinction between the earthly church and the church as spiritual ideal, the Bride of Christ, without "blemishes and wrinkles," as St. Augustine rather dermatologically put it. But these entities are theologically and organizationally connected: That is how it is possible to even talk about a fallible human pope who can nonetheless make infallible statements on matters of doctrine *ex cathedra*, something no rabbi or Protestant minister would claim to be able to do. Yet the Pope left undiscussed the involvement of assorted popes and/or saints in the activities he describes, raising the interesting question of where on the ontological scale these worthies belong: If they are guilty humans who act in history, why not mention them? If they are part of the church as perfect spiritual entity, how could they have promoted torture and enslavement? One wonders who indeed was minding the store.

Apologies about past misdoings are all the rage. The Southern Baptists apologized for slavery, and so has President Clinton, who also apologized for Monica Lewinsky, for the Tuskegee experiments and for permitting genocide in Rwanda; Australia has National Sorry Day, to send its regrets to the aborigines. But what does it mean to regret a hundred-year-old crime, or a 500-year-old crime, or even the murder of millions after it is too late to help them? Apologies of this sort usually mean the person who makes them is trying to close the books, not open them. Thus, President Clinton could simultaneously regret inaction in Rwanda and stay aloof as Central Africa goes up in flames. The Southern Baptists can regret slavery, but take no stand on restitution—paying black Americans for their lost inheritance, the fruits of that 250 years of labor, education and normal citizenship stolen from their ancestors. And in the same way, the Pope can regret the Catholic role in anti-Semitism and Nazism while simultaneously moving to sanctify 10,000 pro-Franco Spanish priests, nuns and brothers and to canonize Pope Pius IX, who, among other misdeeds, forced the Italian Jews back into the ghetto and actually kidnapped and raised as his own son a Jewish child on the grounds that he had been surreptitiously baptized by a maid. (An attempt to canonize Pius in 1954 was derailed when evidence came to light that he had seriously mistreated the child.)

The case of women is even more egregious. It's all very well to apologize for the sins of the past—burning witches, opposing suffrage, telling battered wives they had no choice but to stay with their husbands and so on. But what about now? The church continues to oppose "artificial" birth control, even condoms in AIDS-plagued Africa; abortion, although women in some Catholic Latin American countries have illegal abortions at higher rates than US women have legal ones; divorce, no matter how abusive the marriage; opening the priesthood to women. In a church in which every position of theological power is held by a man, women are not equal, they are inferior. In *First Things* magazine, Mary Ann Glendon, a Harvard law professor who headed the Vatican's delegation to the UN Beijing Conference on Women, argues that feminist critics of the church forget the great advance for women early Christianity represented over paganism. Maybe so, but that was 2,000 years ago.

The most interesting question about the Pope's apologies is why he felt the need to make them. No leader makes ninety-five plus apologies unless he really has to—Stalin never said he was sorry for the Moscow show trials, Mao never apologized for the Cultural Revolution. That the Pope decided to acknowledge the historical wrongs of the church shows how weak it has become. As reported in the ultraconservative *Latin Mass Quarterly*, which holds that the rot set in when Latin went out, since 1970 the church has lost ground throughout the West in virtually every area: numbers of priests, nuns, brothers, seminarians, schools, marriages and baptisms. In Latin America, Pentecostalism is making major inroads. The Pope can rail against contemporary Catholics for secularism and religious indifference all he wants, and blame the people in the pews for the actions of the hierarchy, but modernity is stronger than he is: Look who's apologizing. ■

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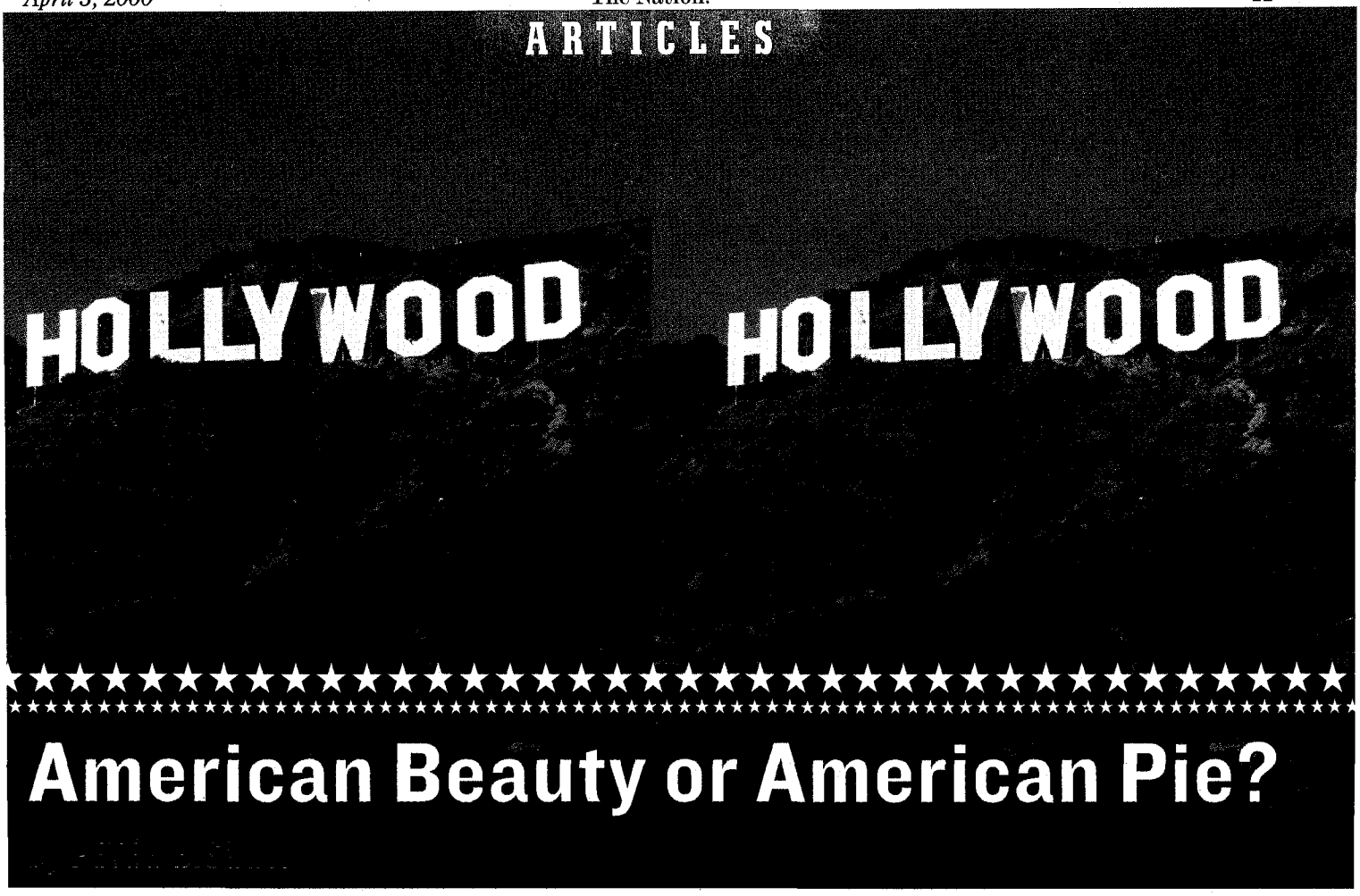
ARTICLES



American Beauty or American Pie?

Last year, I was the guest editor of *The Nation*'s first issue devoted exclusively to Hollywood and politics. I used this space to explain why the magazine would be inclined to set out on a road that would carry it so far from its customary haunts, although, of course, throughout its long and distinguished life it has always published exceptional writing about film, not only from the current practitioner, Stuart Klawans, but also from the great James Agee and even, I learn, from Sergei Eisenstein, all of which is shortly to be assembled between two covers by Carl Bromley for Nation Books, the new imprint at The Nation Institute. So now it is the following year, and here is the sequel—immune, I hope, to the dangers of sequelitis that often afflict Hollywood's attempts at self-cloning. Although the following assemblage of pieces is rather eclectic, there is an emphasis on the so-called "independent" film just—as is so often the case when phenomena become sufficiently defined as to go under the microscope—at the moment that it may be disappearing, a victim of its own success.

Over the past few years the profile of independent films has risen so high that studios, not satisfied with buying up independent companies and hiring independent directors, have tentatively begun to experiment with films that are in most ways—except production values—indistinguishable from their "off-Hollywood" counterparts. Last year we had *American Beauty* from DreamWorks, *Ride With the Devil* from Universal, *Election* from Paramount, *Three Kings* from Warner Brothers, *Fight Club* from Twentieth Century Fox and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* from Paramount/Miramax. In fact, two of the directors of the most successful and critically acclaimed studio films of last year began their careers connected to Miramax: M. Night Shyamalan and Alexander Payne, while David O. Russell began at Fine Line and Anthony Minghella at Goldwyn. Meanwhile, the obverse is also true. Miramax's first hit after a lengthy drought is *Scream 3*, for all intents and purposes a studio film, despite a glance backward at the late, lamented American International Pictures.

Many of the independents look to the films of the seventies for inspiration. There will never be another such era, the good old golden days of the "New Hollywood," when the studios were so out of touch with the changes that were rocking the country that they opened their purses to hordes of longhaired, dope-smoking directors who promptly created some of the greatest movies Hollywood has ever known. But something's happening now, Mr. Jones, that's not far from it. In 1969 *Easy Rider* turned Hollywood on its ear. In 1999 it was *The Blair Witch Project*, which, like *Easy Rider*, not only scored a huge profit on a tiny investment, reminding Hollywood of an unpleasant truth—that despite its sophisticated tracking techniques and test screenings, it knows nothing—but more important, in its crudely shot, badly lit, sloppily edited rawness, *Blair Witch* overturned the tyranny of technical correctness so that millions of pallid Internet drones could shout, Me too! I can do that! So once again the gates have been flung open, and just as the last generation of independents has tasted respectability, a new mob of kids

Peter Biskind, a contributing editor to Vanity Fair, *is working on a book about independents.*

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armed with matchbook-sized DV cameras is poised to join their ranks.

The crucial difference between now and then is that today the studios are hardly hurting, and consequently, although they're hungry for young talent, they'll be dictating the terms of employment to all but a lucky few. Moreover, today's independents and their fans are young and irreverent, but not necessarily "political" in the way the counterculture audience of the Vietnam era was. A lot of these filmmakers are just as eager to make the next *American Pie*, last year's raunchy teenage blockbuster, as viewers are to see it. Still, many of the independents are creating bodies of work that are as uncompromising and compelling as anything that came before. We asked seven influential independents—Kimberly Pierce, David O. Russell, Alexander Payne, Allison Anders, Kevin Smith, Christine Vachon and John Pierson—to mull over some of these issues in this year's Forum and discovered, not unexpectedly (they are, after all, independents), that they disagree about most everything. The studio/independent hybrids, the trading places, the buyouts and takeovers have so muddied the waters that the old arguments about what is truly independent have taken on the aspect of the proverbial debate over how many angels can fit on the head of a pin. Many have just thrown up their hands—a tacit acceptance of the marriage between Hollywood and the independents—calling the new setup "Indiewood."

Meanwhile, there are other changes afoot at the studios. For a couple of years now, it has been no secret that decisions about what we're seeing at the local multiplex are increasingly being made by women. In this issue, the always smart and funny Lynda Obst, herself a producer and founding member of the girls' club, explains how this came to be and what it bodes. We also have, among other offerings, an angry if bemused piece by the actor, writer, director and performance artist Danny Hoch on his misadventures in Hollywood, as well as a gimlet-eyed snapshot by Orville Schell of the Dalai Lama's progress through the unholy land of ego, power and occasional donations.

Hollywood has always been about the tug of war between art and commerce. Whereas last year the theme of our issue was money, this year we're feeling a little more upbeat. While money will always light up the eyes of studio honchos like dollar signs spinning in a slot machine, art—thanks in part to the independents, but also to a handful of studio executives who are keeping their hearts and minds well above the bottom line—is holding its own. ■

FORUM

Inside Indiewood

The Best of Times, the Worst of Times

Edited by PETER BISKIND

The Nation **asked seven** prominent members of the independent film community, including several filmmakers who released major films this year, to take the temperature of the movement at this moment of flux. Participating are Allison Anders (*Sugar Town*); Alexander Payne (*Election*); Kimberly Pierce (*Boys Don't Cry*); John Pierson, former filmmakers' rep and author of the bible on independents, *Spike, Mike, Slackers and Dykes*; David O. Russell (*Three Kings*); Kevin Smith (*Dogma*); and Christine Vachon, a producer of *Boys Don't Cry*, *Happiness*, *Velvet Goldmine* and many other films. The interviews were conducted and edited by Peter Biskind.

Q: ***Historically, independents have defined themselves against Hollywood, but last year the studios made several movies that displayed many of the characteristics of independent films. Meanwhile, more and more independent directors are working within the studio system. What's going on here?***

Allison Anders: *American Beauty* is not my idea of an independent movie. What was the budget on that? Like $30 million or something? And you've got these huge stars, Kevin Spacey and Annette Bening. Come on. That's the same scale as *The Graduate* was back in 1967. It's a studio movie for thinking adults, you know? It's a screenwriter's vision, not a director's vision. This guy [director Sam Mendes] is from England, doesn't know American culture. It's not like the Coen brothers where they're sitting there writing the script and cracking each other up and putting in fucking crazy-ass music and stuff. [Mendes] was a director-for-hire. My film *Sugar Town* opened the same weekend as *American Beauty*. If you have a choice between seeing an independent with [actors] you don't know and seeing *American Beauty* with stars in it, then you're like, Well, maybe I'll go see that. Which is what happened to *Sugar Town*.

John Pierson: Hey, look, David O. Russell is like my hero right now because here's a guy who made a no-budget film, *Spanking the Monkey*, and then made a midlevel Miramax screwball comedy, *Flirting With Disaster*, that seemed to me to be still very personal and really hilarious, and then *Three Kings*, making probably the most political film of the year—inside the studio system, like a termite. Putting George Clooney in the film and getting Warners to pay for it, that's great.

Q: ***So now it's OK for independents to work for studios?***

Kevin Smith: Independent cinema is a myth. It was always kind of weird when people went, Yeah, you're an "indie." With the exception of *Clerks*, I've always made studio films—*Mallrats* for Universal, *Chasing Amy* and *Dogma* for Miramax, which is now a studio.

Christine Vachon: I'm wondering if "independent" ever really did mean anything, you know? When I started producing ten or twelve years ago, an independent film was essentially a movie that you managed to finance by conning your friends and relatives into giving you money for [it], and all the so-called independent films

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I worked on were some kind of permutation of that, like *Parting Glances* or the first film I produced, *Poison*. I guess independence was supposed to mean free from any kind of creative control. But it's very rare these days that any money is "free." Whether it's the studio telling you that you have to put a star in or an equity financier telling you that you have to put a star in, they're still both saying it. So what difference does it make if that money is coming from New Line or if it's coming from Paramount or if it's coming from Joe Blow? Somebody wants to get their money back.

Q: What happens to independents when they end up in the belly of the beast? David, how did you land at Warner Brothers, traditionally one of the most conservative studios, known for mega-budget Kevin Costner vehicles, the* Lethal Weapon *series and so on?

David O. Russell: When I made my first two films, which could be considered classically independent, the studios would all meet with me and say, Come make a movie here. It was interesting to me to take them up on that hunger with a very subversive large film. To answer, Will you really? And keep saying "really" until they said no. But they never said no.

They showed me this straight-ahead action script about the Gulf War. I started doing some research and thought: Boy, this could be interesting. Take an action picture and put all these politics in it and a subversive attitude. I told them that, and they said, OK. I said, I don't want to do this and bring it back and have you freak out. They said, No, no, we've made these films with Oliver Stone and Martin Scorsese. The week I handed in my script there was an article in the *New York Times* lambasting Warner Brothers, saying it had bombed with dumb picture after dumb picture with very generic formulas and they need to work with more exciting filmmakers. I think that gave a lot of the young executives in the company hope. You know, they wanted to shake it up. Lorenzo di Bonaventura [of Warner Brothers] said to me at one point that if he couldn't take risks like this, he didn't want his job anymore.

There was one person at the studio who tried to stop me. He thought, This movie is not a studio movie, and it should not be made. And he appealed to George Clooney, saying, The politics of this film are going to make your life dangerous and you're going to come under a lot of heat. From both patriotic Americans and patriotic Muslims. But George stood up for the film, said to the executive, I don't believe you.

Q: So what's happened? Are we seeing the greening of the studios?

Smith: I think it's the Miramaxization of the studio system. Like five years ago, would a studio have made *American Beauty*? Never! Would a studio have made something like *Three Kings*? Not nearly as quirky as David made it. It would have been a pretty much straight-down-the-middle war movie.

Russell: I think something has changed. I think the Sundance culture has definitely had an impact on the audiences of the United States—they've become more sophisticated—and also the studios. Ten years ago *Three Kings*—a war/action movie—or *Election*—a high school movie—would have been *Heartbreak Ridge* with Clint Eastwood, or—name a high school movie from ten years ago. Look at *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. On the face of it, it's a straight thriller, but at another level it's so dark and homosexual, you know, for a movie of that scale. But there are executives who yearn to work with independent-minded filmmakers and make the film that is different from the run-of-the-mill "product." Maybe I have a somewhat warped view, but I see plenty of that. My feeling is that many of them would be very happy to work with any of the directors in this forum, happy to make films like *Election* or *Boys Don't Cry*. Studios want to find that *Good Will Hunting* audience.

Pierson: Well, it's an astonishing development. I think they'll do more. With caution. But let's not get carried away.

Vachon: We certainly had the experience with studios that have been anxious to work with us and then have looked at how we actually make our movies and have basically said, You're crazy, we can't make a movie like that. It's not like we're such insane guerrilla filmmakers who are out there on the seat of our pants. It's just like with *Boys Don't Cry*, you're banking on a director that has virtually no experience. You're putting in as your star a kid who has only been on a television series. What studio in the world would have allowed that to happen? None of them!

Q: *Kimberly, you got blown off by MGM, didn't you?*

Kimberly Pierce: I showed *Boys Don't Cry* to MGM, and they got totally excited. They said, We're green-lighting it. And I'm like, Are you sure? Because if you green-light this picture I'm gonna quit my job. So I gave notice, flew out to LA, bought all these new clothes because you have to for the meeting, go in there, seems fine, but they just kind of dick around. It's no skin off their back because I'm nobody, right? Christine Vachon, who was my producer, she followed up, and it was like, It's green-lit, well, maybe it's not green-lit, and then I'm like, Well what color is it? Red? Is it off, is it on? Meanwhile I'm back in New York and my bills are piling up. I did get my job back.

Q: *Traditionally studios have been interested in skimming off the cream of the independent crop, but what often happens is that once they get them, they hamstring them. Did that happen to you, David?*

Russell: They were most comfortable with the more traditional elements of *Three Kings*, the action elements. But we were always in a money fight, because they knew the film was dark and so they tried to keep the budget down, which was around $47 million. The first thing they went after was, Well, you don't need to go inside the body and you don't know if it's going to work anyway. That's the kind of thing you're hanging on to by your fingernails and running off to the side with the cinematographer to do. They said, If this body-cavity thing doesn't test well, we're going to try to get you to take it out. Fortunately, audiences liked it. I do want to credit Warner Brothers. I think it is the Steve Ross tradition over there. They're very loving to filmmakers.

Q: *So, is your next film up going to be a studio film?*

Russell: Having been through this hybrid experience, I'm not in a hurry to repeat it. I found it stressful, combining the Hollywood genre pressures and budgets with independent-minded ideas, which you do have to fight for. I guess in this case it was just the sheer undertaking of it that wore me out. I just hated the size of the crew, it was so big and unwieldy. I looked at the set and I said to myself, What am I doing here? In the future, I'd be happy to work on smaller-scale, character-based pictures. At least for a

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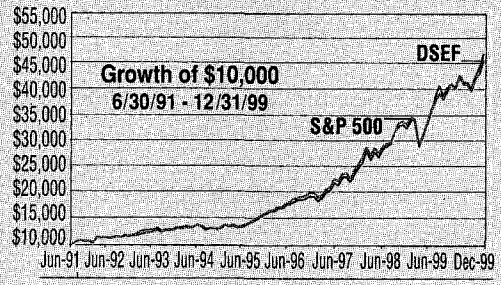

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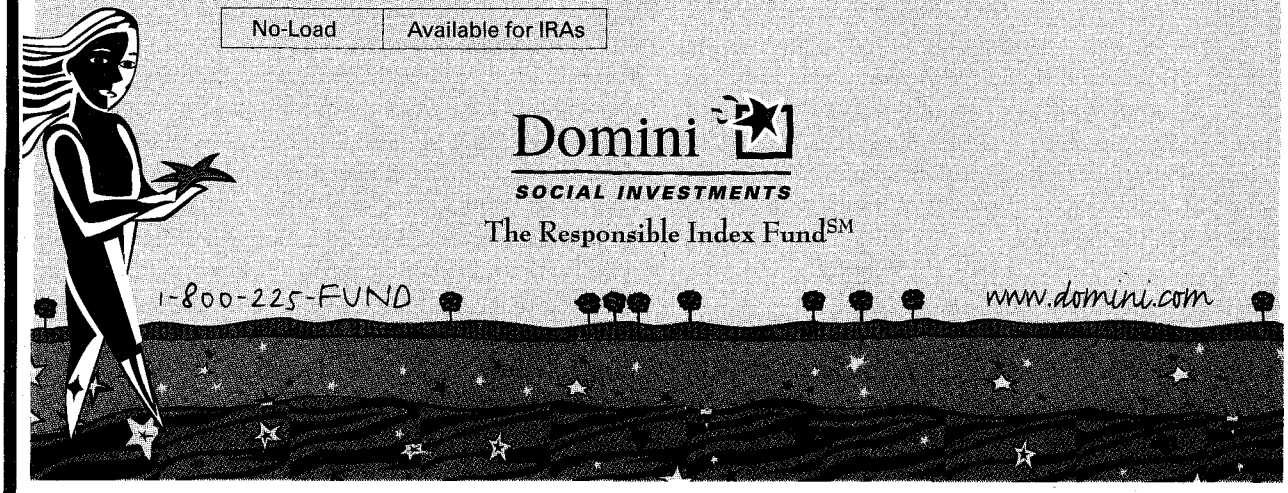

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few movies. I suspect I would be left alone more on a smaller film because the investment is smaller.

Q: ***Anybody else?***
Pierce: I'm doing my next film with a mini-major. You're with a studio whatever you do. If I don't accept any money and I write this script and then sell it to Hollywood, it's the same difference. The real question is, What are the terms? My deal gives me final cut. I write the script, and they look at it and give me notes. I don't have to take them, [but] if they're good notes I will.

Q: ***What's the downside?***
Vachon: The kind of movies we make will never really "test well." And having to go through that process is always frustrating. Todd Haynes is always going to make movies that are extraordinary and unlike anything else you've ever seen, whether you like them or not. So try and fit his kind of round peg into a square hole, and it makes me feel horrible. We test-screened *Velvet Goldmine* at Miramax's insistence, and it was difficult. I mean, the two movies aren't comparable, but if you'd test-screened *2001*, it would have bombed.
Russell: I don't think the majors have figured out yet how to market these pictures. I don't think they knew how to market Alexander's movie [*Election*] or *Rushmore*, which is a film that I liked a lot. Or my movie even. There's no greater heartbreak for a filmmaker than to find yourself in the hands of a big marketing machine that has been doing *Conspiracy Theory* with Mel Gibson or that sort of thing. It's frightening.
Alexander Payne: The unfortunate thing about the cinema today is that the presence of marketable elements is far more important to distribution divisions than the quality of the film. Even in script stage, marketing will say, If this film had such and such a star, or if it got into the story more quickly and easily, or if it were such and such a genre, or the ending were changed in such a way, or if this character were made more sympathetic, we could market it better. Have them change the content of the film. Egotistically speaking, I'm in the genre of Alexander Payne films, and I love the idea that my films are difficult to categorize. The mistake they made with them was putting a happy face on what are considered in today's market dark films. I feel that dark merely means realistic, films that don't buy into these prettified myths of how people live, and who people are, that we've been fed for the last twenty years.

Q: ***Aren't big studios more sensitive to pressure groups, so you get potential censorship situations where they dump controversial pictures like*** **Happiness** ***and*** **Dogma*****?***
Pierson: It's not just about the politics or the protest or the aesthetic. It's a calculation, like, what will I do for this return? *Happiness* is not going to be a breakout, top-grossing movie, so it's like, OK, we got this much trouble to make this much money. It's really about the money.

Q: ***So if the historic differences between studios and independents are increasingly blurred, does the term "independent" retain any meaning at all?***
Smith: My definition of independent used to be any film that couldn't be made through a studio. So I guess at the beginning of the millennium, independent really seems to mean films that surprise people when they actually do any business!
Pierce: Am I still an independent based on this new deal I have, the same way I was when I sat in my New York apartment for years, unpaid? I don't know. I mean I'd like to think so. I'd be naïve to think that the money and the power that I'm getting doesn't at least pose a temptation of change. I'd never had need for an agent, and then suddenly my life was unmanageable without one. The gifts start coming, you're getting the champagne and you're getting the calls while you're in the shower. But the main thing is not to think about stars, not to think about Sundance, not to think about distribution, just think about who these characters are and what's going to bring them to life.
Pierson: I think that you can still use budget levels as a fair criterion. Anybody who is making a film for less than $100,000 is an independent filmmaker. When it's applied to a film like *Pulp Fiction*, people can go back and forth. But by the time you get to *Good Will Hunting*, it's just not worth the breath. It's like, Oh, come on now. It's the oh-come-on-now factor.
Payne: You know what? Just because I only spent $150,000 on this film, that doesn't suddenly ennoble me with this great independent voice. The thing is, the budget of a film does not matter; who is in a film, the stars, none of it matters as long as we're allowed to exercise our authorial voice.
Anders: To me it means the director is the auteur. This is his or her personal vision. It was not a director-for-hire kind of thing, it was not made by a committee. There can be big stars in it, but an actor didn't take over and kick the director out. A studio didn't come in and take over.

Q: ***In this context, does "selling out" mean anything anymore?***
Smith: It used to be easier to go, This is a fucking sellout. Now, it's a bit nebulous. I've heard that *Chasing Amy* was a sellout, and I'm like, really? I mean I don't have the checks to show for it. I've heard *Dogma* was a sellout because I had stars in it—[but] it would have been so much easier and so many fewer headaches had that movie never gone into production. So the selling-out thing, you don't take it very seriously. It's usually hurled at you by 17-, 18-year-olds on the Internet.

Q: ***Suppose Jerry Bruckheimer came to you and said, Kevin, I want you to direct*** **Armageddon.** ***You're my guy. Would you do it?***
Smith: See, I would never do *Armageddon*, but not because, hey man, I wouldn't make a piece of shit like *Armageddon*. I just don't have the talent to pull it off or the patience. [Armageddon director] Michael Bay lives, breathes and eats that kind of filmmaking. I barely live, breathe and eat the kind of filmmaking that would get a student a B on his film thesis project at film school.

Q: ***Maybe it gets down to: Would you take big money to direct a film you weren't interested in?***
Smith: *Holy Man* was offered to me to direct, with a pretty hefty price tag, too. They said, You can rewrite it and direct it for blank. And blank was more money than I've ever seen in my life. More money than I've made with directing fees on all my films combined—for making one movie. Which, you know, would be a very cushy job. But I just couldn't do it, because it's not really

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what I want to do, and I didn't write it. So therefore I don't know what it should look or sound like. The idea of taking a paycheck to do something that I don't really have a passion for and could easily be replaced by somebody else, that to me is selling out, because that's just being really inauthentic to yourself as a quote-unquote artist.

Q: ***Do any of you consider your films political?***
Pierce: Yes, not because that was my intention, but because *Boys Don't Cry* is coming out of a cultural wound, a crime against identity, against gender. Our culture destroyed Brandon Teena. He kind of aspired to be a Montgomery Clift or a James Dean. He wanted to get the girl just as much as any of those guys, and did it in Hollywood style, you know, bar fights and car races, and now he's joining the legacy of Hollywood stars in a way. It was so moving to me when I saw Hilary Swank as a form of Brandon walk onto the Golden Globe stage to get that award. It was like, My God, Brandon's arrived. How did the culture let that slip by? Because I think people were saying, I love Brandon, and not judging him, and that was the point, to give him a kind of acceptance after his death that he couldn't get in his life.

Q: ***Look at*** **Election.** ***Even though it came out almost a year ago, if you put it against the template of the primaries, it's a contemporary political satire: Tracy Flick is Gore, bred from birth to robotically run for president; George W. is Paul Metzler, the dumb but sweet jock; and McCain is the third-party dark horse, Tammy Metzler, sans lesbianism.***
Payne: I have no idea. In writing it we always thought Paul Metzler was sort of Reaganish, just a nice guy who smiles a lot and everything good happens to him. But politics is not something preconceived. It's something that just emerges.

Q: ***What about you, Kevin? John Pierson once quoted you in his book saying, somewhat enviously, that Spike Lee could write politics and you couldn't. But*** **Clerks** ***is on one level full of class commentary, and*** **Chasing Amy** ***has a lot to say about gender issues. It's just not explicit.***
Smith: Yeah, I guess it depends on what your idea of politics is. For me, when I watched *Do the Right Thing* many years ago, it was like, Never in a million years would this story occur to me. How could it? I don't have a black perspective. But the stuff I do know about is being a white guy. I worked in a convenience store, and I guess there are some politics attached to that. But if I had known that going in, it would have been very obvious and not nearly authentic. And probably would have corrupted the whole thing. Because I started out not knowing what the hell it was; I just wanted to write the story.

Q: ***Alexander, you once made a provocative statement: "Being a young American filmmaker is worse than making films under Communism, because the commercial and ideological exigencies are so strict that they suppress creativity." What did you mean by that?***
Payne: I mean you always work under cultural and ideological constraints. Under Communism the workers are always good, the capitalists are always bad. How is it different here where the lead character has to be sympathetic, by page 30 such-and-such has to happen. If it's a couple who are apart, they have to come back together; if there's a crime, it must be punished. Someone recently said to me, Well in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, he gets away with it. There are just assumptions about how things should be that outrage me. And that even extends to how films are lit. As a director you have to fight that. Why is that smoke there? What's that light source coming from over there? Why is this actress so pretty? Why is this actor's hair combed so nicely given the circumstances? Why are all the cars clean? What is this anal thing about everything in a movie having to be clean, pretty and beautiful? Like the typical American family, it's upper middle class with a big open kitchen, and they all have Range Rovers. Who are these people? I'm tired of it. [Hollywood conventions] are more rigid because you could at least make art under Communism. I think if I lived in an oppressive country I might become a truly great filmmaker.

Q: ***Because you'd be forced to use indirection?***
Payne: Of course. You saw it in so many Eastern European directors under Communism, and now you see it in films from Iran. Scorsese talks correctly about the film director as smuggler.

Q: ***In*** **Mean Streets** ***and*** **Taxi Driver,** ***he appears as a criminal. Director as killer.***
Payne: The grenade thrower. I just hope that we are entering an age more where films do throw grenades, where they question, not support, the dominant ideology. Because that's what we used to have, films throwing grenades. I lament that we have so many movies and so many TV stations that film may have lost power to shock and challenge. I didn't get one single protest letter from *Citizen Ruth*, not one.

Q: ***There were an unusual number of women at Sundance this year.***
Anders: It's not making the first film that's so difficult for women; it's making the second one and building up a body of work. A lot of things have stopped women from moving forward. One is the mythology of the young male independent filmmaker, the new Orson Welles. It's like everyone is looking for this Orson Welles. You want a guy who walks off his second movie and goes to Mexico and doesn't finish it and the studio recuts it. Why is that myth so powerful? I'm to the point where I wish he had never been born.
Vachon: I have to disagree. I hate hearing—like, My movie is not getting made because I'm a lesbian, or it's not getting made because I'm a woman, or it's not getting made because I'm black, because a lot of those scripts come to me and I can tell you exactly why they're not being made, and it's not because of that person's gender or sexuality. It's because they're lousy. Or the director is insisting on an unknown. Or the budget is $10 million when it could get made for three. Or because the idea is so inherently anticommercial that it's better to do it for $200,000 on digital. I honestly believe that great work wins out in the end. And I have to believe that. Because otherwise it's just like, why bother?

Q: ***If it's true that women find second films so hard to finance, why is it true?***
Anders: The first film, you are making it no matter what. You're just plowing ahead doing all the things that you have to do despite someone in one of the women's issues in *Premiere*—she should

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be hung—who said, I don't think any woman would make a film like Robert Rodriguez did, he really sacrificed a lot to make his first movie. I did phone sex to make my first movie. How dare she! I know a girl who's a stripper to make money to make her film. What happens with the second movie is that you think that you now are going to be courted, and you are being courted to a certain extent, but they're also courting these young white males that they have seen at the festival, and that's where their money is going to go. The support just isn't there. The fact that Kimberly Pierce hasn't been nominated for an award herself—why not? They are nominating her actresses, which is great, but why, if people loved her direction so much, is she not nominated?

Q: ***Are women better off in the independent world than in the studio world?***

Anders: I think we are a bit worse off in the independent world. The independent film companies are looking for the men just as much as [the studios]. I really turn to the black filmmakers for my model because there's always something out of Spike Lee's mouth that helps me get perspective on our place in the industry. Some journalist once asked him, Are you encouraged now that so many black filmmakers are working? Of course, there were about five. And he said, No, I'll be encouraged when we're getting the same budgets. I'll be encouraged when we're getting the same opportunities. Women are too grateful when we get to make a movie. While I think gratitude is a very nice spiritual trait to have, enough already. It is time to move into action because gratitude alone never got women anything, and certainly it didn't get us the vote and everything else that we've accomplished. Kimberly's movie is almost a metaphor for this—like, Well, I'll just pretend I'm a boy and hope no one notices I'm a girl. And you know, I just got to go look at what happened to Teena in the end. I don't want to be there. I'm a girl, and I've got a voice, and I'm going to make a movie as a girl.

Q: ***The other striking metaphor for female filmmakers appears in* The Blair Witch Project, *where the director is a woman, and she's not only killed, she's humiliated, the arrogant know-it-all who got them into it.***

Anders: Right. It's almost like they got killed for supporting her vision. You followed this crazy person.

Q: ***How do you size up the revolution to come in digital production and distribution?***

Payne: You know what? Certainly the digital thing makes the means of production accessible to everybody, which is interesting, but it doesn't solve the filmmaker's problem of what's the script, what's the story and what are you going to do. The same thing happened thirty years ago with 16 millimeter and Cassavetes starting to make films. We've seen it before. I still like 35-millimeter film in theaters. It's the only thing I think about.

Q: ***So, is it the best of times or the worst of times?***

Pierson: I hate the idea that it's become easier for anybody with a first-time success to now parlay that into additional films. If the wrong people get those opportunities and keep churning out what's obviously a glut of films right now, that begins to clog the arteries for first-time talent trying to come in the traditional way, making a movie that goes to a festival and gets released in a theater.

By the same token, in this twenty-year cycle that we've had, I think a lot of ground has been covered, so it's increasingly hard for those people to be truly original. And now marketing is king. Anything that can begin to succeed will succeed at a far higher level than ever, and that's because audiences—even the smart audiences—enjoy being marketed to, and so they flock to the one film instead of spreading out the vote among dozens.

Vachon: When I first started making movies, if a film like *Poison* did $1 million worth of box office, that was seen as great success. Everybody got a little bit of money in their pockets. Then the bar rose. Some people have blamed *Pulp Fiction*. I don't know if that was it, but there was a feeding frenzy about these movies, suddenly a sense that they could potentially make real money. *Safe* was the kind of movie that should have sat in a theater and become the movie that people talked about at cocktail parties, but it didn't have time. It came out just as that was all shifting, where if you didn't deliver the numbers in the first week or two, you were out. The kind of movies I was making, which could be targeted to the gay audience and not lose money because of their budgets and the low cost of distributing them, all that has gone out the window now. To do a genuine theatrical release for a film is much more expensive than it used to be. I think the p&a [prints and ads] budget on *Poison* in 1990 was something like $80,000. On *Velvet Goldmine* in 1998, it must have been somewhere between $5 million and $10 million.

Q: ***So it's becoming a first-weekend business, just like with studio films?***

Vachon: Exactly. And on *Boys Don't Cry*, we were huddled by our phones that whole weekend. Are they buying tickets? Are they going? Because I knew my movie's fate rested on that.

Pierson: The key to me is that indies still think they are fighting studios, and clearly they're fighting each other. I counted 175 indie releases in New York last year, or 180. Over 175. You can't even remember 100 of them.

Q: ***Another way of asking this question is, If* Clerks *came along today, could it break through the way it did in 1994 at Sundance?***

Smith: If we'd made *Clerks* today, I doubt it would have gotten into Sundance—Well, maybe. It wouldn't have gotten into competition, that's for sure. And Miramax would not have touched it with a ten-foot pole. Too small. Far beneath them. We were the last in a long line of small American independent films that they really pushed, that they made their name on.

Q: ***So, it's the worst of times?***

Pierson: Not necessarily. A big plus now is that very talented people like Kevin Smith and David Russell can step inside the system but leave the door open so they can step back out. And filmmakers who made their names on first features can actually have sustained, ongoing filmmaking careers. ■

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Searching for the Dalai Lama

Dispirited Stars Find Absolution in Buddhism

ORVILLE SCHELL

A gridlock of limousines with opaque smoked windows chokes the narrow cobblestoned entranceway that divides the two wings of the Beverly-Wilshire Hotel, one of the palaces at which Hollywood royalty gathers to attend the endless fund-raising events they are called on to support. The sense of congestion is heightened by the throng of onlookers. In front of the main entrance to the hotel's grand ballroom, an unruly mass of TV cameramen, news crews, print journalists and still-photographers with huge bazookalike lenses faces a scrum of autograph-seekers, fans and gawkers—the kind of inchoate crowd that assembles at a moment's notice in Hollywood whenever word spreads that a celebrity may be about to appear.

> In the film enclaves of LA, spiritual searching is now a pastime second only to making money.

Every time a limousine pulls up and its doors open, sun guns—bright, battery-powered lights mounted on TV cameras—flash on in anticipation, for tonight, His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama will be the guest of honor at a dinner for the American Himalayan Foundation, a philanthropy run by financier Richard Blum, the husband of California Senator Dianne Feinstein. Although the foundation's mandate is to fund community projects in the Himalayan region, few of those gathered outside are thinking about clinics, small-scale hydroelectric dams, restored monasteries or even the Dalai Lama himself. Instead, in a state of high excitement, they await the galaxy of celebrities about to arrive.

Suddenly a murmur ripples through the press area, and the sun guns brighten, bathing an incoming limousine in a blaze of light. Its doors open to the chatter of camera shutters as Meg Ryan and Dennis Quaid, fortified behind dark glasses, sweep up the steps past reporters and autograph hounds alike. They quickly disappear, as if sucked into the refuge of the lobby by a powerful current of air.

Harrison Ford appears with his two young children and his wife, *Kundun* scriptwriter Melissa Mathison. Showing little of the boyish charm that first brought him to the world's attention as Han Solo in *Star Wars*, he looks as somber as someone crossing a treacherous no man's land where even eye contact might unleash a wave of unfriendly fire. He makes a beeline for the hotel entrance, his children tucked protectively between him and his wife.

"Fuck, man! He dissed us!" exclaims a young man in a LIVE HARD T-shirt. But there's no time to dwell on hurt feelings. Like a Swiss clock striking the hour and emitting a circular procession of figurines, one after another the stars are now popping from their limousines.

"Hey! Why's the lama still not here?" one of the autograph-seekers behind me yells.

"Do you think he'll sign?" counters another young man who clutches a dogeared autograph album for dear life. "You dream, man. Anyway, the guy probably doesn't even do English." Their conversation is truncated as Richard Gere, the Hollywood star most identified with the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan independence movement, steps from a limousine. Mayhem breaks loose as supplicants cry out for autographs or interviews. Gere pauses respectfully in front of the steps, shielding his eyes against the glare of the lights. He thrusts his hands deep into his pockets, seems to hesitate, starts for the ballroom door as if to breeze past everyone and then at the last second veers abruptly toward the press area, where he comes to rest in front of a crew from *Entertainment Tonight*. As Gere patiently answers questions, every TV cameraman in the press corral strains to get a shot.

In the film enclaves of Los Angeles, spiritual searching is now a pastime second only to making money. And Richard Gere is viewed by many as one of the main progenitors, the Grand American Lama, of Buddhism's Hollywood beachhead. It was Gere who fired Hollywood's first Tibet-related shot heard round the world, at the 1993 Academy Awards ceremony, where he startled global viewers by using his time at the microphone to protest China's occupation of Tibet. Since then, he has been tireless in his support of the Tibetan-exile cause and an uncompromising critic of China's human rights abuses. Any quest to make sense of Hollywood's fascination with Tibet would therefore have to begin with Gere.

"With the Chinese, it's David and Goliath, and I think that's clearly how the Tibetans have managed to consolidate whatever outside support they have," Gere explains. "Many of us constantly remind our Tibetan friends, 'You must maintain that sense of uniqueness and that genuine cultural commitment to nonviolence. If you pick up arms and become like the Palestinians, you'll lose your special status.' In other words, whatever they do politically has to be in keeping with who they are as a culture. To do that has been extremely difficult."

Gere recalls his painful early attempts at mastering the rudiments of Zen Buddhist practice. "Every day…there would be four

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Orville Schell is dean of the graduate school of journalism at the University of California, Berkeley. This article is adapted from Virtual Tibet: The Search for Shangri-La From the Himalayas to Hollywood *(Metropolitan).*

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or five people who would be rushing to do *dokusan* [face-to-face study with the *roshi*, or master]. They all had something to tell the *roshi*, and I would think, 'Oh, fuck, I've got nothing, absolutely nothing.' The first time I started mumbling, and he just stopped me and said, 'More *zazen*!' and threw me out. And then the next day it was the same. Another twelve hours go by, and I'm starting to break down. My back's killing me, my legs are killing, my everything's killing—I mean screaming! Dealing with my brain at that point was also very painful.... So I don't want to go in there because I've got nothing. I'm stupid and I'm lost and I've got no right to be here and I'm scum! So I start crying. I want him to really like me and think I'm sensitive. So I cry. And he laughs and tells me to go out and do more *zazen*! Anyway, you try every possible thing that you can to avoid the fact that your brain cannot wrap itself around this." Eventually, Gere gave up trying. "[But] they made me go in to see *roshi*...and I was so lost I just sat there silently. He sat there with me and said, 'Okay, now we can begin.'"

BRIAN REA

Gere says that he has only missed three or four days of meditation—because he was "too drunk, too fucked up"—in the more than two decades since. "When I first got involved with the Tibetans, they could have really just glommed onto me as a movie star," Gere continues. "I mean, I've been glommed onto by other people in political or social ways, trying to get money and whatnot. Instead, they gave me a book, a flier and some cookies and tea. They never asked for anything! In the end, of course, it was an extraordinary strategy because it made me give more in return by making me feel, 'Hey! These people don't want anything but my own happiness!'"

I ask what Gere views as the West's main projection onto the Dalai Lama. "It's that just by proximity to him, you will get spiritually healed," he suggests. "Although that's a pretty silly thing, every time I'm around His Holiness I must confess that I do sort of hope to get 'zapped.'"

Of the recent urge to put Tibet on the big screen in movies like *Kundun*, *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Windhorse*, Gere says, "In the end, they're all just movies. They will be transformative only to the degree that one wants to be transformed and is capable of being transformed. The dangers are that one will get a kind of wet catharsis from them. Namely, people will think that because they've lived through a movie, they have somehow lived through the Tibetan experience and had an effect on it. In that way, people may just allow Tibet's problems to be put back into their compartment, while they move on to the next film."

Back at the Beverly-Wilshire, the celebrities are still arriving. Here come R.E.M. singer Michael Stipe and Red Hot Chili Peppers bassist Flea. While the still-photographers are hunched over their cameras firing away with automatic drives like tailgunners in a dogfight, a white stretch limousine of such epic length that it seems to sag in the middle noses up to the curb. Out steps action-adventure-film star Steven Seagal. A meaty six-foot-four man, he wears a Chinese-style yellow silk brocade jacket with a high mandarin collar, embroidered with golden dragons. His hair is gathered in a close-cropped pigtail, and he clutches an elaborate Tibetan talisman of silver that looks like a small lantern. He is accompanied by a complement of hefty, gum-chewing retainer/bodyguards in dark suits, a retinue that makes him look like a cross between a fifties banana-republic potentate and a mutant Gilbert and Sullivan mikado.

Seagal is among the most extravagant self-styled Tibetan Buddhists in the Hollywood pantheon. "My involvement has been quite secret up until now," he says in a hushed tone, when I question him later. "There are still many things I cannot talk about, actions to be taken in real life on behalf of the Tibetans that will not just be in movies." His eyes narrow as he fixes me with a well-rehearsed look that mixes self-importance with a hint of menace.

"I've kept my spiritualism secret because people don't understand it. Friends have never gotten this part of my life, but there are many great lamas who recognize me as someone strange and from another time, who refer to me as one of them. I feel a kinship beyond words with them, something really deep. People all over the world come up to me and recognize me as a great spiritual leader." He gives me another penetrating stare. "I'd like to spread any kind of light I can and lead people into the dharma.

"I do films because I can put little seeds in them that can become spirituality. But Hollywood is a dream by people whose demonic impulses have kept me under their thumb. I have one more Warner Brothers film to do, and then I'm on my own and can make the kind of spiritual Tibet films I want."

"And how do you view the Dalai Lama?"

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"I've seen so much bullshitting from people who just want to be associated with the Dalai Lama," he replies, his voice tinged with barely suppressed scorn. "But the Dalai Lama gave me a spiritual blessing that would not have been given to anyone who was not special. I don't think he has given such a blessing to another white person."

According to a later flurry of news articles in 1997, while on a trip to India Seagal met Penor Rinpoche, the eleventh throne-holder of the Palyul tradition from Eastern Tibet and the supreme head of the Nyingma lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, the oldest and most mystically inclined of the four main Buddhist lineages. Penor Rinpoche had already attracted much skeptical attention in the American Buddhist community when, while on a trip to the United States in 1988, he enthroned a woman from Brooklyn named Catherine Burroughs as Jetsunma Ahkon Lhamo, the re-incarnation of a seventeenth-century saint who was the sister of Kunzang Sherab, the founder of the Palyul tradition in Tibet. It was she who became known as the "Buddha from Brooklyn." Penor was in the process of setting up dharma centers around the world when Seagal invited him to LA. There were rumors that Seagal contributed financially to Penor's school of Buddhism. Kunzang Palyul Choling, his "seat in the West," located in Poolesville, Maryland, was already under the direction of Burroughs.

'People all over the world recognize me as a great spiritual leader.'

—Steven Seagal

What Seagal, who had long hoped he would be "found" to be the reincarnation of a high Tibetan lama, wanted of Penor Rinpoche was a "clarification" of his status in hope that some evidence of Buddhahood might be officially discovered. Indeed, after consultation with other lamas, Penor did conveniently confirm Seagal's intimations of spiritual greatness. It was reported in the press that an actual investiture ceremony had been held that February at Namdroling monastery in Bylakuppe, India. At the ceremony, Seagal was formally recognized before a crowd of some 1,500 people not only as a *tulku* but as the reincarnation of Chungdrag Dorje, a revered seventeenth-century *terton*, or "revealer of the treasures of Padmasambhava," the grand progenitor of Tibetan Buddhism.

Unlike the *paparazzi*, I have been invited to the $300-a-person banquet and the $700-a-person VIP reception that is to precede it. From the hallway outside the reception, where coordinators equipped with headsets are on patrol, comes the distinctive high-pitched din of cocktail voices competing to be heard. Inside, the Dalai Lama stands at the far end of this plushly designed room, a diminutive red-robed figure in a receiving line that includes Gere, Mathison and Ford. One after another, he greets the hundreds of guests who wait patiently in line to shake his hand. He smiles, welcoming each with a deferential little bow, and then warmly clasps their hand in his own as a photographer clicks the crucial snapshot.

Reaching for a tray of hors d'oeuvres, I find myself elbow to elbow with actress Sharon Stone, resplendent in an off-white silk pantsuit and pale white makeup that lend her the air of a Greek statue come to life. A young, robed and obviously enamored monk approaches her. In stuttering English, he nervously asks if she will pose with him for a snapshot, a request to which she agrees with good cheer.

Later, when Stone finally reaches the head of the receiving line, the Dalai Lama grasps her hand with no sign of recognition. Only after frenzied whispering and prompting from Gere and Mathison does his body suddenly jolt upright. For a moment he fixes his grinning gaze on her beautiful Hollywood face, makes a little cooing noise of delight and then clutches her hand with extra vigor and holds it for a long moment.

It is well over an hour before all the faithful have trooped reverently by, in a process headlined by the *Los Angeles Times* the next day as HOLLYWOOD ELITE SAYS HELLO, DALAI. They exhibit a respect bordering on veneration that few besides Nelson Mandela or Mother Teresa could have elicited. Yet what the Dalai Lama has to offer the denizens of this rarefied world is actually quite fragile—his unbesmirched spiritual integrity. Paradoxically, in his new relationship with the West his allure still depends on the very aloofness long associated with Tibet in the popular mind. In Hollywood, where everyone is out hustling something, there is nothing more beguiling, even unnerving, than someone in the limelight who restrains him- or herself. Thus, the Dalai Lama finds himself enmeshed in a contradiction. He must give face time to stars such as these if he is to serve his cause, raise money and acquaint more people around the world with Buddhism and the plight of his people. He must also, however, carefully guard against any act that might seem to debase his moral and spiritual currency, thereby making him appear mundane.

Indeed, nowhere does familiarity breed so much contempt as here; to be too readily possessed in LA is to become uniquely undesirable. As in Buddhism, an excess of visible desire is a distinctly negative currency. Indeed, perhaps something is already draining from his presence. As venerated as he still is, many of his Hollywood admirers and supporters have come to view him not so much as awe-inspiring in his ineffability but as lovable—a warmhearted, even cuddly religious icon whose appeal derives in part from his unpretentiousness and the fact that his fame in no way threatens theirs. "Let's face it, the Dalai Lama is a great guy to hang out with," writes Bill Higgins, a columnist for the *Los Angeles Times* who spends time each year on spiritual retreats in India. "He's warm, he's friendly. Since the age of two he's studied being a great guy, and he's had the best teachers. He's trained to see everyone as the Buddha."

Just as the huge throng of well-wishers—including director Oliver Stone, transcendentalist and actress Shirley MacLaine, the rock group Lama Boys, film star Rebecca De Mornay, producer Sydney Pollack, *Star Trek*ker Leonard Nimoy, composer Philip Glass, lounge singer Jim Nabors and Beastie Boy Adam Yauch—finally settle down to a radicchio and roasted-garlic salad, a troop

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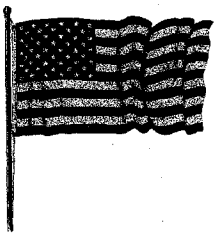

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of yellow-bonneted monks of the Gelugpa lineage, the sect to which the Dalai Lama belongs, ascends to the stage and begins a guttural chanting of prayers. I'm reminded of the chanting halls of monasteries I have visited in Tibet, although here, of course, no rancid yak butter burns in the votive lamps, no pilgrims clamor, there is nothing, in short, of the grimy, greasy, smoky, dark atmosphere of real monasteries filled with real monks.

Oliver Stone, a twice-wounded Vietnam veteran and the controversial Academy Award–winning director of films ranging from *Platoon* (1986), his epic tale of Vietnam, and *JFK* (1991), a conspiracy-minded account of the assassination of the former President, to *Natural Born Killers* (1994), a violent tale of spree-killing, is something of a Hollywood Buddhist pioneer. Buddhism first came to Stone's attention through his work on *Heaven and Earth*, his 1993 film based on the harrowing Vietnam memoir of Le Ly Hayslip. Undergoing a painful divorce at the time, he was impressed by the way Hayslip's Buddhism had helped her through her own wartime hardships. Although the film was a great disappointment at the box office, making it served as a spiritual journey for Stone that he claims helped change his life.

Soon after the film was finished, he made a pilgrimage to Tibet. On returning to the United States, he helped set up a dharma center in Los Angeles for Kusum Lingpa, a Tibetan monk who, after nearly two decades in prison, became Stone's spiritual teacher.

> 'I've lived with puritan guilt all my life. Now I don't choose to live like that.'
>
> —Oliver Stone

Raised as a liberal Episcopalian on New York's wealthy Upper East Side, Stone considers his interest in Buddhism largely a private affair. But he acknowledges that he has always been spiritually inclined and has always had to "wrestle with" faith and God. He complains, "Christ was all about pain and suffering—about a guy dying on a cross—whereas Buddhism is about detachment from suffering. I've identified with pain and puritan Anglican guilt all my early life. Now I don't choose to live like that." So he welcomes Buddhism for having helped him "get out from under the monstrously oppressive God the Father."

"I'm happier just living my life and meditating every day on the concept of emptiness," he tells me. "Buddhism is sometimes hard to grasp, but it's the road to happiness and to reconciliation with the idea of death." He clasps his hands in front of him in a prayerlike gesture and sits silently for a moment. "There's a lot of preparation to be done for dying, something that was forever in my face in Vietnam, where the chaplains were always saying, 'You gotta go out and kill for Christ!' There is a shallow form of every religion, even of Christianity. But unlike fundamentalist Christianity or Islam, I've never seen any kind of harmful Buddhism develop. Tibetans seem to regard the practice of Buddhism as a kind of play."

It may seem odd that a film director possessed of such a dark, violent, even apocalyptic view of life should be drawn to Buddhism and its tenets of contemplation, nonviolence and compassion toward all living creatures. But Stone insists that violence is an inherent part of every human being that cannot be completely escaped. What offends him onscreen is not the cinematic depiction of violence but films where its consequences aren't shown—where, as he says, "people just fall dead and that's it."

Not insignificant, he finds Tibetan Buddhism a little more forgiving of his "wild Western practices" than Vietnamese or Japanese Buddhism. "I don't subscribe to the asceticism of Buddhism," he says, a sly, gaptoothed smile creeping across his face.

Perhaps part of what draws Stone and others in the film community to Buddhism and Tibet is that they are able to construe it as absolving their particular sins of choice. While Christianity offers mercy, it can also be suffocatingly censorious of sinners. In its place, Buddhism offers the dharma—Buddha's teachings—and Hollywood's version of the dharma does not usually involve browbeating or stern admonishments to followers to take hold of themselves and live in a "godly" way.

The Dalai Lama is sitting to one side of a stage on a raised dais between Mathison and Gere. He gazes around at this ocean of glitterati and the sumptuously arrayed tables decorated with more than 10,000 roses, a gift from one of his California admirers, and a disbelieving smile crosses his face. Taking Gere's hand in his own, he chuckles in wonderment and shakes his head in evident disbelief, as if, even after these many years of exile and globe-girdling, he still retains the power to be amazed by the incongruities that can arise around his public presence.

Others begin eating their sumptuous dinner, but he sips only tea. When it is time for him to address the crowd, he is greeted with a thunderous ovation. Then a silence descends so profound that most guests do not even dare sip their water for fear of clinking ice cubes in their glasses. He begins by talking about the need to promote tolerance, nonviolence and compassion, then segues into an expression of ardent hope that China's leaders will soon sit down and talk with him about his country's future. Sharon Stone is so moved that she must dab tears away with a napkin.

Unexpectedly, he talks for almost an hour, so that it is nearly 9 by the time the main course can be served. When his speech finally ends, hundreds of guests—who may have been hoping for a more pithy display of Oriental wisdom—quickly steal away, leaving hundreds of expensive dinners behind. But then, this is the city where people regularly eat (or, at least, order) meals in serial fashion as they wedge multiple business appointments into a single breakfast or lunch hour. Who can say what events beckon the powerful and famous gathered here tonight?

In any case, the dinner is counted a great success. The illustrious crowd of stars seems ample testimony to the continuing allure of Tibet and the ability of its singular emissary to translate his spiritual message and the tragedy of his people into an international cause célèbre. And it is these aristocrats of the kingdom of entertainment who will, mostly unwittingly, help write a new chapter in the history of Western mythology about Tibet. ■

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Revenge of the 'D' Girls

From a Cubicle to a Studio of One's Own

LYNDA OBST

The gender seesaw in Hollywood has been a preoccupation of mine since I arrived here in the Pleistocene era of the eighties, when it was pretty much all see and no saw. From my lowly vantage point as the only girl in the room—present only because I'd actually read the script under discussion—I studied the behavior of my ponytailed male bosses. When they were "being creative" (meeting with a writer) they would lazily lift their cowboy boots onto their Southwestern conference tables and begin to amble through half-baked thoughts about scripts they'd never read based on notes written by girls like me. Usually, my bosses were amiable and nonconfrontational, embracing any tangent that might emerge. Occasionally they would jump up as though struck by lightning and pace around the room, spinning out an idea that "gave them chills," and then plop back down into their chair, forgetting to write any of it down.

The meetings were watch-glancers, a form of treading water between real meetings. The moguls were conserving their attention for meetings with players, meetings promising "action," not "activity," as one of them was fond of saying. This meant that he was comfortable in the realm of "doing things" as opposed to sitting around chatting like a bunch of girls.

The girls of Hollywood were then called "D" girls (and are still, along with "D" guys), for development, and their jobs were to read scripts, write notes, be charming (with a small "c"). If invited to attend the meeting, it was to amiably dispense fancy water and occasionally make witty liberal-arts-type observations that would endear them to the "lesser talent" in the room, usually male writers. These jumpy guys, pitching their guts out, cleaved to the consoling presence of a nurturing "D" girl, and like Hansel and Gretel, together they faced the studio demons.

Then, lo and behold, many of these writers turned out to be directors or powers in their own right. This past decade has seen the emergence of the highly paid Almost Powerful Writer. "Writers who get movies made," in the local parlance, earn upwards of $750,000 per script, and much to the horror of producers, their onscreen credit is now second only to the director in sequence. It has become increasingly clear—even in marketing-obsessed Tinseltown—that the play's the thing. These Almost Powerful Writers helped create the powerful female movie executive. To make a prismatic story narrative, the girls relegated to reading the scripts of the writers they were to "develop" are now running the studios. Karma.

At the root of the sea change for writers is the near-total control of the process by movie stars. Their desire for career longevity, their need for credibility and their "heart in art" (when it is) make the movie star the ultimate arbiter of scripts. The films they want to do get made. Stars can only win Oscars with good writing, so they are the natural allies of good writers. Writers are the allies of the people who read them. Who suspected that a little skill, plus the effort of actually reading the material, could turn out to be such an enormous career boost?

That's how it gathered steam, all this recent Girl Power in Hollywood. The early birds captured the worm (a more apt description of the head-of-production job is hard to imagine). Many now in power were mentored by the so-called glass-ceiling breakers—extraordinary women, with outsize personalities, talent and wills—like Paramount's Sherry Lansing and the late Dawn Steel: mentors, girlfriends and Mack trucks.

Now that the best and the brightest of a past generation of "D" girls have the big jobs and Gucci cowboy boots of their own—chintz offices and aggravation—what difference does it make? At current writing, there are six women at the top of their studios making decisions about what movies should get made: three as chairwomen and three as heads of production. Do they create kinder, gentler distribution schedules? Should we worry for the muscle action picture? Will more women be driving them, creating a hybrid form—let's call it the velvet action picture—like last season's entry from Sherry Lansing, *Double Jeopardy*? Or will we see more and more romantic comedies, or just plain romances? Will the Christmas season be bedecked with family fare, mothers and daughters weeping and movies starring Ben Affleck? Is this bad? Whither Arnold? Sly?

Now that the best and brightest of the "D" girls have the big jobs, what difference does it make?

These were my questions last season, when the talented Amy Pascal emerged as a major power at Sony. Having risen through Columbia's development grind, championing unlikely winners such as *A League of Their Own* and *Little Women*, as well as quirky sleepers like *Groundhog Day*, Pascal was a one-woman development boutique suddenly charged with picking pictures for two studios, Columbia and its sister studio TriStar. When she was promoted to chairwoman this past November, I was struck by an almost backlash undercurrent in the reporting of the trade

Lynda Obst is a producer at Paramount Pictures and the author of "Hello, He Lied" and Other Truths From the Hollywood Trenches *(Broadway).*

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papers. One paper seemed to chide her for championing chick flicks and by implication wondered whether her feminine "niche" sensibility would propel the big seasonal blockbusters—we call them tentpoles—on which a studio depends. The next week *Stuart Little*, greenlit by Pascal, was the highest-grossing movie of the Christmas season. It was the shortest wait for box-office vindication since *Titanic*. Among the pictures she has driven into production are a new generation's *Charlie's Angels* with Drew Barrymore, Cameron Diaz and Lucy Liu; Adam Sandler's *Big Daddy*; and a movie about addiction recovery, starring Sandra Bullock, called *28 Days*. Pascal initiated her regime by inviting the best of the Almost Powerful Writers to finally become truly powerful by offering them gross points for the first time (local algorithm: gross points=3D power). She knew on which side her bread was buttered.

So it looks at a quick glance like there might be a sensibility shift in the air. Yet last year's most controversial action film, *Fight Club*, directed by arguably the genre's most talented filmmaker, David Fincher, was bought and driven into production by a woman, Fox 2000's Laura Ziskin. The last film under her tenure was a remake of *Anna and the King*, starring Jodie Foster.

Go figure. At Fox 2000, she was replaced by Fox exec Elizabeth Gabler, who produced *Entrapment*, starring Sean Connery and Catherine Zeta-Jones. Is this sexyish international cat-and-mouse romp the model for the elusive "velvet actioner"? Many think so. Is it a chick flick? Men like Catherine Zeta-Jones. Women like Sean Connery. Who knows?

But this season Sherry Lansing's blockbuster formula at Paramount is the talk of the town. It's not just that the "Sherry Movie" (as it has now been colloquially named) reached its Platonic ideal in last autumn's unlikely hit *Double Jeopardy*. It's that the formula worked this time shorn of all adornments. It required no more than the bare bones of the paradigm: *Wronged Woman Gets Revenge!* You could search the best penne haunts in Santa Monica and you could not find one person who predicted the eventual $120 million box-office performance of this movie.

What is a Sherry Movie, and does it take a woman to make one? From *Fatal Attraction* (which she produced) to *Indecent Proposal* to *The First Wives Club*, what they share is a theme, a raison d'être: *A Girl With a Gun: We Won't Be Fooled Again.* It may not be the feminism we dreamed of, but it's sure the feminism that works at the box office. Is this the hybrid velvet actioner that all this Girl Power wrought?

It can't be, really, because Sherry invented the genre before the rest of these women came to power. And it's not like those are the only movies her studio makes. In the past few years of her tenure she has overseen movies like *Forrest Gump*, *Titanic* and *Mission Impossible*, not exactly a slumber party. Her choices have to be diverse for her to succeed. My theory is that this is the ultimate advantage of women executives. It is what we do most naturally: please everyone. We know in our bones that ours are not the only appetites to be satisfied at the dinner table. But we do have our unique taste, too.

How do the "D" girls change, once given real authority? Do they suddenly act like men or, as Brenda Patimkin would say, grow a penis? Does one come with the office, like a bathroom of one's own? They're a pretty adorable lot, as moguls go, though needless to say, each is capable of astonishing ruthlessness. They are cuddly, ferocious, insecure and brave, with growing attention deficit disorder.

One of them, a particular favorite of mine, is fond of saying that she can't believe she's actually running the studio. She claims to look around her office for the person in actual authority. But as seductively confidential and insecure as she might seem, she tells you nothing she doesn't want you to know. Another whom I happily worked for seems tough as hell, indomitable, but when nervous, will reveal anything, even against her self-interest. All of them work obsessively and are either pining for or toiling with the support of a family. None would feel complete without it, no matter how august her title. They yell. They cheerlead. They disappoint, they inspire. They are fighting for their lives in a town where career and living are one and the same.

Recently I had the strange pleasure of listening to two guys pitch me a chick flick. My newest "D" guy, a recent Princeton grad, and a male studio executive, fresh from Shearson Lehman, were selling me a female-empowerment twist on what I'd thought was a scary idea for a thriller. When I first heard the outline of the pitch, I visualized a kind of female *Dressed to Kill*: An obsessed woman stalks rich and powerful executives, manipulating them by remote control. Mid-meeting, the guys had turned the antagonist into the protagonist, explaining to me that her actions were well-earned consequences of her treatment at the hands of the more powerful men. She was a victim, they spun, and her anger was a symptom of her cross to bear as a woman. Whoa, I thought to myself as I watched these cute young guys try to get it. We've come a long way, baby.

My mind wandered. I started thinking that this year for the first time my company had more "D" guys than "D" girls. My "D" guy is the first in the office in the morning and volunteers to read every script, just like we used to do. He's available to photocopy on weekends, a task previously only performed by women, willing to do anything for the extra credit. Is it possible that boys no longer take for granted their patriarchal advantages, no longer assume that they will be promoted first? Are girls taking female mentoring as their due? I have some anecdotal reason to fear that some of the younger generation is so determined not to mimic the late-if-any marriage and motherhood scenarios of their former role models that they have better things to do with their weekend time. Is it possible the sense of entitlement has switched? That girls now expect the expense-account lunches and dinners as part of the search for the future husband—and the guys are now early birds killing themselves to catch the worm? That boys are the new girls?

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Before I get carried away with the sci-fi implications of all this sawing on the nineties seesaw, it's time to remember how hard the old model dies. For example, a famous action producer held a wrap party recently for his still-shooting heist movie. Afraid there might not be enough beautiful women around for his pals, actors and crew to ogle, it was rumored that he hired "models" to be guests and was kind enough to send them through his wardrobe, hair and makeup department, to reduce the aesthetic risk.

The hottest young stars in Hollywood covet a new party ticket above all others: Hef's Playboy Mansion. Recently on E! Entertainment Television I had the dubious pleasure of watching three generations of men chase buxom women around a grotto. Hef himself was showing off his four giant blond girlfriends, straight off the bus from Vancouver. I watched hipsters like Vince Vaughn alongside sexagenarians like Martin Landau and Robert Culp living *la dolce vita*. Starlets grazed the grounds like giraffes. When asked, they claimed to be searching all over the mansion for producers. But all the ones I know were at home in bed in flannies, reading scripts. ■

Mr. Hoch Goes to Hollywood

Why *Whiteboys* Wasn't at a Theater Near You

DANNY HOCH

I wanted to be an actor, and I am. Fortunately I've managed to make my living doing theater for more than ten years, and gained a little bit of fame to boot. I'm also a writer, and I seem to have carved out a niche in the arts, often referred to as solo theater, performance art, griot and, most recently, hip-hop theater. I'm lucky. I haven't really done anything avant-garde or new. I've just done what the actor has done for thousands of years. I play characters and tell stories about my diverse community in New York City, and about my incomparable and ever-changing hip-hop generation: community and generation.

I never wanted to do theater to get "discovered" by Hollywood. Discovery makes me think of Columbus. The idea of some Hollywood entity "finding" me and exploiting me to make me into a "star" makes me want to commit suicide. Yet although I'm happy doing theater and affecting people in an ancient way, there is always the temptation to reach...a wider audience. And of course to make more money—money to invest in my community and generation, at which my government does such a shameful job.

So, along comes Hollywood knocking at my door. For years I had turned down offers in movies and television shows that not only ignored the realities of my community and generation but often reduced those realities to glorified stereotypes and minstrelsy. However, trying to be fair and give Hollywood the benefit of the doubt, not wanting to be a righteous socialist, I took a chance. I took several chances, expecting Hollywood to hand over some power, some money, some screen time. After all, Hollywood owes theater billions of dollars. Before there were actors in front of a camera there were actors on a stage. And before that there were actors in the bush, representing and reflecting the problems, ironies and stories of their communities. Hollywood has been stealing our actors, writers, directors for seventy-five years. Not to go off on a tangent, but it makes me want to shoot up a movie studio when Hollywood folks come to my shows in New York or Los Angeles and actually expect to get "industry comp" tickets at the door. "Oh, we're from MTV...we're from Paramount...Miramax." Go fuck yourselves. You can't pay a $15 theater ticket? A price that was deliberately made low, to give low-income youth access to theater. But you can spend $25 million on some film that has nothing to do with anyone's community—anywhere on the planet—without blinking.

Among several Hollywood offers I indulged, I was asked to guest-star in an episode of *Seinfeld*. I was honored because I didn't even have to audition. They just wanted—me. But when I got to the set, they asked me to play a Puerto Rican "pool guy" who cleans up towels and jumps around like an idiot and talks with a "funny Spanish accent." I argued respectfully with Jerry and his crew of distinguished producers about the offensiveness of what they were asking me to participate in, about the power of their show. I argued that people in Idaho, Australia, even in government were already forming their opinions about Latinos, blacks, Asians, Native Americans from the one-dimensional image "opportunities" that existed for them in film and television. When I asked how they (and I) could traffic in these stereotypes, I was swiftly removed from the role and sent back to New York. When I wrote about the experience, I was criticized for "attacking a Jew who is innocently entertaining us with his show about nothing." Some even accused me of being anti-Semitic. I wonder if they would have seen Jerry Seinfeld as anti-Semitic if he burned an Israeli flag, instead of the Puerto Rican flag they burned and stomped on during the last season of his show.

Back in Brooklyn, having recuperated from my futile political argument with some jaded Hollywood millionaire stars, I was asked by the director Terrance Malick to be in his much anticipated *Thin Red Line*. He wanted me to play a Brooklyn soldier in World War II. Again I was honored. The film was acclaimed before it started shooting. Malick hired several noted theater actors like myself to play the main roles: Adrien Brody, Tim Blake Nelson, John C. Reilly and so on. Then he hired some "real people" who had little or no acting experience to play other principal roles. And last, he was forced to hire a slew of A-list actors to bring home the box office: Travolta, Penn, Nolte, Cusack, Harrelson,

Danny Hoch is an actor, writer and teacher. His book Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop *was released last fall by Villard/Random House. The film* Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop *will be released in 2000...we hope.*

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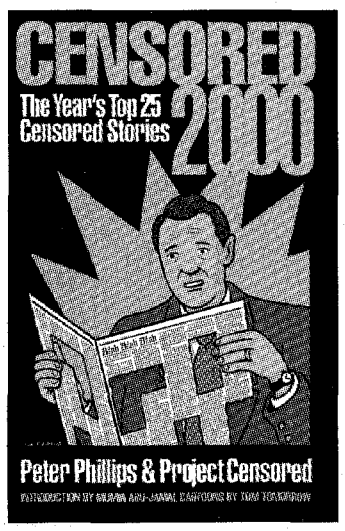

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Clooney, etc. So I went to Australia for a month and shot some great scenes with some amazing actors. After a year, Terrance Malick had made an extraordinary film with Adrien Brody as the lead. Yet when he showed the five-hour masterpiece to the executives at Fox, they refused to release a film of that length. I'm sure that Malick had counted on them to respect his vision. I mean, he's a living legend in film, and they had given him an astounding budget and six months to shoot (unheard of in Hollywood these days). Well, the executives at Fox didn't think they would get their money back with a five-hour movie, and they made a business decision. They had Malick splice together all the scenes with the stars in them, and cut out the scenes with the unknown actors. The best scenes. The release print was roughly two and a half hours. The scenes of more than ten actors who spent six months in the jungle of Australia were removed from the film, including Adrien Brody—who was the central character. That's why, if you've seen the film, it makes no sense. So much for art, even on a $53 million budget.

Speaking of budgets, a few years ago I had the honor of working with the acclaimed writer/director Darnell Martin on a series pilot for ABC, whose weekly-series budgets run anywhere from half a million to $2 million—a week. We were excited because the development executives (in Hollywood they're called "creative people") were excited about our work and about the idea of developing a multi-ethnic weekly series about teenagers in urban America that didn't condescend to its intended audience like *Dangerous Minds* had the year before. We even stripped down some of the grit to make it suitable for network television. Ms. Martin and I didn't enter into this with the "goal" of making it big in TV. We genuinely thought that we were being given the responsibility and the opportunity to say something important to a wide, young audience, and we took it very seriously. We also had plans to hire youth and work with community-based organizations, so that the diverse communities of America could see themselves represented respectfully on television, in all of their complexity. Something that the networks are only now beginning to "discuss" with the NAACP and other organizations.

Anyway, Darnell and I spent a year working on the project, which was called *Point Blank.* ABC promised to shoot it that season. But just before the green-light decisions were made, we were told

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that there were too many nonwhite central characters. That although the creative people at the network liked it, the bosses up top who were selling ad time thought it was "too specific."

ABC is not the only studio guilty of this "too specific" shit. The list of offenders turning down pitches and ideas specifically because they are "too specific" reads like a who's who of Hollywood. Paramount, NBC, CBS, Warner Brothers, Universal, New Line, Miramax—even publishers from Bantam to Grove think like this. I was told by a supposedly progressive thirty-something editor, "People who read don't want to read that stuff." "America is mostly white people, Danny, and they don't wanna watch that," a former executive at Paramount told me once. It's got to be a conspiracy.

Well, if America is mostly white people (whatever that means), then, I thought, maybe I could infiltrate their bizarre formula by making a film with a white central character. My friend G. Belcon and I spent two years writing *Whiteboys*, a tragicomedy about a white kid in Iowa named Flip-Dogg, who is obsessed with gangsta rap music and gets all his images of African-Americans from TV, like most people around the world do. His obsession is so great that he wants to be black, or at least his TV definition of "black." I was shocked to find out that Fox Searchlight, Fox's subsidiary and so-called indie distributor, was going to finance it at a budget of $5 million.

I remember asking the executives at Searchlight if Rupert Murdoch's conservative politics would affect the way our film was treated. After all, the film is not candy-coated. It asks some deep questions about identity and the media. The executive, Lindsay Law (what a great name), assured me that the budget was so small "it won't even cause a blip on the radar at Fox," and we could do whatever we wanted and we'd have their unconditional support. I should have smelled the bullshit flying out of Lindsay Law's mouth, but we were on the phone. A few months later, the film actually got made. But Searchlight kept stalling the release, saying that it had poor exit polls, that they couldn't tell if it was a comedy or tragedy (oh no!), that they didn't know how to market it. If you don't know how to market a film in 1999 about a white kid in Iowa obsessed with hip-hop, then you shouldn't be in the film business, should you?

Ultimately the truth surfaced by pure serendipity. A journalist friend of mine was flying first class from LA to New York and happened to sit next to someone from Fox's parent company, NewsCorp, who had a copy of *Whiteboys* under his arm as he sat down. Newscorp supposedly never meddles in Fox's film divisions. My friend naïvely asked him about the film and why he had the script—at which point an entire menu of Fox's censorship practices was revealed. Although *Whiteboys* wasn't violent by Hollywood standards, it contained scenes with white youth and violence in the same scene, and it was being reviewed by the NewsCorp folks to determine whether the film might garner protest, in the wake of the mass shooting in Littleton, Colorado. In addition, there was concern that white communities would be offended by the youth portrayed in the film. Hollywood never seems to question whether it offends black Americans by mocking them, or Latin Americans by clowning them, or Asian or Native Americans by ignoring them. But how dare we offend white Americans. What a crime that would be.

Ultimately we missed our scheduled summer release, and although Fox had to release the film contractually, they did it under such cover that not even my family or friends knew when or where it was playing—and we live in New York City! Fox then used "poor box office" to justify its closure, and that's that. They might as well have shelved it, but then they would have gotten sued. Well, they're getting sued anyway, so fuck 'em.

But hey, Hollywood's not all assholes. There are some good people. Yet I wonder if they stand any chance. Recently a friend of mine at a major studio called me and said, "Listen, I just got a senior development job here. I'm gonna make sure your stuff gets on the air. It needs to be seen by all America. You have such a diverse audience, and it's completely sellable to any advertiser. They'll eat it up."

I told her that I was willing to sit down and discuss a deal, and that although I knew it was network TV and there were guidelines to be adhered to, they couldn't censor my ideas, and the project was the project, period. No replacing black male leads with skinny blonde white girls. No replacing sociopolitical themes for minstrelsy or inanities or themes "about nothing." But before she could even set up a "meeting," her bosses started to worry, "Well, wait a second—we know he's hot and we love his work, but what exactly is it that he wants to do? What if we think a white character is more appropriate?" They canceled our meeting. And this is supposedly the free-

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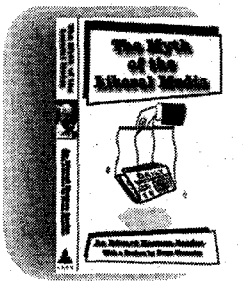
The Myth of the Liberal Media
An Edward Herman Reader



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thinking world. No censorship and a rainbow of multiculti love? Where's my meeting? I guess I've learned, you can only get your ideas across to a mass audience, whether it's news, TV or film, if they are Hollywood's ideas. If you allow the creative people at the studios to butcher, dilute and censor your ideas, then you can participate in the entertainment industry.

These "creative people" never went to writing school, acting school or storytelling school and have no idea what is happening in the communities of North America, let alone the world. But they sure know how to sell some Nikes, boy. I used to think these creative people in Hollywood weren't creative at all, that they were mere sneaker salesmen and popcorn saleswomen. But they are more creative than us artists. Because they generate a product that is so condescending, so stifling, so pacifying, that we sit there and watch billions of dollars of ads and think nothing of it. Matter of fact, we don't think anything at all. They are master creators of passivity. And they didn't even go to school for it. Actually they did: business school.

Maybe I should just be happy that I have the opportunity to even be in the room with these esteemed Hollywood people. Maybe I should do anything they ask me to do, blackface and all. Maybe I should stop making a fuss and not speak out anymore. It seems that every time I ask a question, challenge an idea or stand up for a principle in Hollywood, the more I get labeled as "political" and "difficult to work with" and the less they want to be in "business" with me. Maybe that's a good thing. But why should I complain? I'm making a living. I not only have my foot in the door, but every major movie and TV studio knows my work. They all come to my shows, repeatedly. Most come late, but they come. Like flocks of late and clueless vultures begging for comp tickets.

You led me on, Hollywood. You flash your cash and power and say, "This could be yours too." But you lead us all on, every day. It's your very job to lead us on. To the next commercial. At the end of the day, are we all just salespeople? And why should

Runaway Shops

Remember those great scenes in *Blues Brothers 2000* that evoked the urban grit and soul of southside Chicago and Joliet? Well, sorry. Those scenes were actually filmed in a city that doesn't know an el station from Wrigley Field. *Blues Brothers 2000* was shot across the Canadian border, in Toronto.

The same goes for a rapidly increasing number of TV movies and feature films. Production is migrating, principally to Canada, to take advantage of labor costs that are on average 20 percent lower than in the United States. This runaway globalization of production has thrown Hollywood—and its unions—into a full-scale alert. "This issue is at the very top of our legislative and organizational agenda," says Catherine York, director of government relations for the Screen Actors Guild.

Last summer SAG and the Directors Guild issued a joint report measuring the extent of runaway production. The report revealed that between 1990 and 1998 the percentage of US film and TV production occurring overseas doubled, to more than 27 percent of the total. A full 45 percent of generally lower-budget TV movies of the week were being shot overseas by 1998. Canada not only offers lower wages; a clause in the NAFTA treaty allows the government to give film producers a hefty tax credit subsidy for films shot on Canadian soil.

The result: a mini-recession among Hollywood craft and technical workers in the midst of the celebrated economic expansion, with an estimated 60,000 full-time-equivalent jobs lost in three years, and a cumulative economic loss of more than $10 billion.

"I started feeling the squeeze about two years ago," says Mike Everett, an activist in IATSE Local 728, which represents lighting workers and electricians. "It's a sort of crash. All those middle-ground movies of the week and commercials, all the bread-and-butter work, has taken off to Canada and some to Australia." One recent press report described a monthly meeting of a set decorators' local. Of the thirty people who showed up, only three claimed full-time employment. All were fully employed three years ago.

So the unions and other entertainment-industry groups are fighting back. At the national level, SAG, the motion picture academy, the Association of Imaging Technology and Sound, the Directors Guild, the Producers Guild, some IATSE locals and an association of state film commissions have formed the FILM US Alliance. Working with a bipartisan group of Congress members who represent districts dependent on film production, it is fashioning legislation that would offer to companies a 20 percent federal tax credit on wages paid to workers employed in domestic production. Proponents claim this would fully equalize the playing field with Canada's cheaper labor rates. "We are taking a methodical approach to this legislation," says SAG's York. "We are working with the Congressional leadership, with the Ways and Means Committee, to come up with the best approach, the best solution, the best legal vehicle."

In California, the state hardest hit by foreign production, union activists came together to form the Film and Television Action Committee. The FTAC has been pressuring the California legislature to pass a similar wage-credit bill—a caravan of honking Teamsters semitrailers encircled the state Capitol—but it has so far met the resistance of Democratic Governor Gray Davis. A tax-credit bill died in last year's session.

Some union activists are uncomfortable with the tax-credit approach. "It's really just about countering Canadian subsidies with our own subsidies and offering even more corporate welfare to the media giants," says Mike Everett. Along with other more politicized activists, Everett has formed the Hollywood Fair Trade Campaign—a group fighting to strike down NAFTA's Canadian subsidy clause. So far, that's a long-shot strategy. But the Fair Trade Campaign is committed to working within the FTAC alliance toward solutions that go beyond corporate welfare.

As part of that strategy, Hollywood unionists plan to show up at the protest demonstrations now being planned to welcome the Democratic convention to Los Angeles this summer. "Last month we were already able to bring out some Hollywood workers to protest at both the Republican and Democratic debates here in LA," Everett says. "And you can be sure we will be at the convention. I compare this to an issue like Vietnam—an issue that both parties agreed upon. So we need to light a fire under their feet. And until we do, we are not going to go away."

MARC COOPER

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WHAT THE MEDIA ISN'T TELLING YOU

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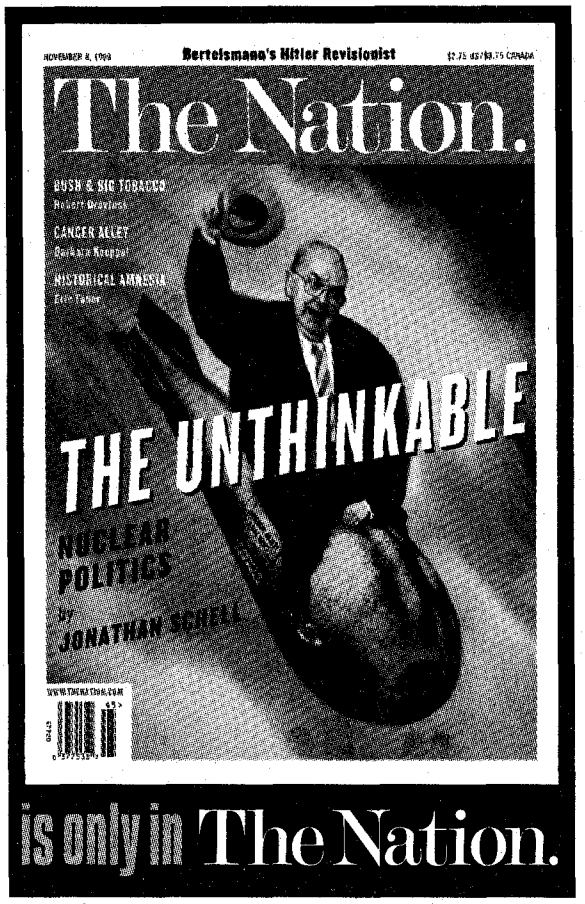
About *The Wall Street Journal* Contrary to its self-assessment as "the world's most important publication," Gore Vidal noted for *The Nation* "just how unknown this cheery neofascist paper is to the majority of Americans."

About Arts Funding As columnist Katha Pollitt wrote, "the right-wing attack on the National Endowment for the Arts is playing to a small, if ferocious, constituency. Contrary to stereotype, Americans *like* the arts, and the more access they have to them, the more they like them. New York City's museums these days are as crowded as Bloomingdale's. Last year Americans spent 50 percent more attending arts than sports events. Even poetry is showing signs of life."



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Cyberreality Bites

Boys, Toys and Girl Trouble in 1999's Top Ten

ELLA TAYLOR

It was, of course, predestined that the top-grossing movie of 1999 would be *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, which outstripped its closest competition by nearly $200 million to rack up a cool $431 million at the box office. Twenty-one years of mass-cult loyalty fueled the fires of the prequel's success, which was further stoked by the marketing millions that Twentieth Century Fox sank into the movie. These days the film industry has eyes for one market only—little boys, including those housed in adult bodies. *Star Wars*, *The Sixth Sense* ($285 million), *Toy Story 2* ($241 million), *Austin Powers—The Spy Who Shagged Me* ($205 million), *The Matrix* ($171 million), *Tarzan* ($171 million), *Big Daddy* ($164 million), *The Mummy* ($155 million), *The Blair Witch Project* ($140 million)—all were aimed at young males, especially the digitally literate. Which leaves only *The Runaway Bride* (languishing in ninth place with $152 million), a callow excuse for a "women's movie," which I shall scold more thoroughly anon.

Writing in these pages last year about the top-grossing movies of 1998, Carl Bromley noted a tendency in Hollywood movies, now that they no longer have Russia or China to kick around, to turn their rage inward and imagine the self-destruction of American political and cultural institutions. The view from 1999 suggests that this trend may quickly come to seem like the good old days. With few exceptions, last year's blockbusters display diffuse anxieties about the collapse of the social structure itself. Politics, in the sense of a public arena animated by human intentions and leadership, elicits only the most languid interest. Heroism is ambiguous, the enemy more a figure of fun than a genuine threat to the social fabric. Reason and material reality give way to an obsessive concern with the supernatural and with cyberreality. Given the target audience, this unease about the boundaries of reality suggests that we should be even more worried about the psyches of the young than we currently are.

The odd man out is *Star Wars Episode I*, which despite its snazzy special effects registers as downright staid with its theme of a republic in decline and its unambiguous belief in heroism, personified in two strenuously homespun Jedi knights in ponchos, armed only with neon swords and humanist principles, who look as though they wandered in from Sherwood Forest. The movie's archvillain, with his simian features and generically Asian accents, still bears the trappings of cold war xenophobia. With its big bad corporation, the Trade Federation, bearing down to eat a tiny peaceful planet alive, *Episode I* is in every sense a throwback, as much an excursion into the recent American past—when we still had foreign superpowers to soak up our paranoia—as it is into Darth Vader's.

Compare and contrast the hipsterish cyberfantasy *The Matrix*, in which a rather indistinct young computer engineer and part-time hacker, aptly named Neo, wakes up to discover that the twentieth century is a simulation. Those of us who have seen enough of the last hundred years to know what we have to answer for may find a secret relief in that. To a generation of cybersurfers, virtual reality is the place they call home. *The Matrix* is a computer-generated world dreamed up by faux-dastardly government agents, archly fitted with Tarantino shades and black suits, to enslave the human race. Though Neo bravely chooses to take a red pill that will enroll him in an undercover freedom training program rather than the blue pill that will maintain him in comfortable slavery, the movie strategically raises doubts about whether he is the One chosen to save mankind. The heroic figures in *The Matrix*—a leather-clad black dude who's the epitome of urban chic, a chain-smoking black homemaker and a hard-bodied, gimlet-eyed, all but anorexic love interest with cropped hair—are designed as much for the jokey maximum cool that boys love as they are for doing good. *The Matrix* cleaves lethargically to a *pro forma* libertarian individualism and a love-conquers-all resolution, reserving its kinetic, adolescent energy for the cyberworld in which it revels, a world in which the human body is an infinitely mutable laboratory experiment. In *The Matrix* it's not just the boundaries between public and private spheres that have gone fuzzy, but those between the body and its habitat, physical or virtual.

For all its cocksure poise, *The Matrix* is powered by a queasy unease about the viability of the manifest world. So, too, with last year's horror movies, in which the supernatural offers an escape from a present perceived as vapid, oppressive or irrelevant. "You don't believe in curses?" legionnaire Brendan Fraser asks the Egyptologist played by Rachel Weisz in the genially silly remake of *The Mummy*. "No, I don't," she retorts. "If I can see it and touch it, I believe it." Which makes her a sitting duck

Ella Taylor is a film critic for the LA Weekly *and the arts and entertainment supplement of* The Atlantic Monthly.

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We the undersigned call upon the United States government to end the sanctions against the people of Iraq.

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At the end of 1998, the United States once again rained bombs on the people of Iraq and the bombing has continued since. But even when the bombs stop falling, the U.S. war against the people of Iraq continues —through the United Nations harsh sanctions on Iraq, which are the direct result of U.S. policy.

This month, U.S. policy will kill 4,500 Iraqi children under the age of 5, according to United Nations studies, just as it did last month and the month before that all the way back to 1991. Since the end of the Gulf War, more than a million Iraqis have died as a direct result of the UN sanctions on Iraq.

To oppose the sanctions is not equivalent to supporting the regime of Saddam Hussein. To oppose the sanctions is to support the Iraqi people. Saddam Hussein is a murderous dictator, who promotes those who are loyal to him and kills all those who voice opposition to his regime. But throughout the 1980s, when it suited U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East, the U.S. government was more than willing to ignore Saddam Hussein's brutality. In fact, U.S. and European companies provided Iraq with materials used to produce Saddam Hussein's "weapons of mass destruction." Moreover, the sanctions have not affected the lifestyle of Saddam Hussein or his inner circle. Food and medicine are available for those who can afford it.

The sanctions hurt only the Iraqi people. The sanctions are weapons of mass destruction. When a UN inspections team visited Iraq to survey the damage from the Gulf War in March 1991, it concluded that the bombing has reduced Iraq to a "pre-industrial age." The team said at that time that if the sanctions were not lifted, the country faced "immediate catastrophe." Yet the sanctions have continued for the last nine years, preventing Iraq from obtaining the hard currency to buy basic food stuffs and medicines—or to rebuild its infrastructure. The oil-for-food deal that allows Iraq to sell $5.2 billion of its oil every six months has had only marginal effects. The United Nations takes one-third of all oil revenues for war reparations and its own expenses. The oil-for-food program does not generate enough money to feed adequately a population of 22 million. Raising the ceiling would not help. The refineries were bombed during the war and need to be rebuilt—even now, Iraq is unable to produce all the oil it is allowed to.

In October 1998, Denis Halliday, the UN coordinator for humanitarian aid to Iraq, resigned in protest, arguing that the sanctions "are starving to death 6,000 Iraqi infants every month, ignoring the human rights of ordinary Iraqis and turning a whole generation against the West."

The sanctions also prevent Iraq from importing many basic necessities. Most pesticides and fertilizer are banned because of their potential military use. Raw sewage is pumped continuously into water that people end up drinking because Iraq's water treatment plants were blown up by US bombs in 1991—and most have never been repaired. Yet chlorine is banned under the sanctions because it also could be of military use. Typhoid, dysentery and cholera have reached epidemic proportions. Farid Zarif, deputy director of the UN humanitarian aid program in Baghdad, argued recently, "We are told that pencils are forbidden because carbon could be extracted from them that might be used to coat airplanes and make them invisible to radar. I am not a military expert, but I find it very disturbing that because of this objection, we cannot give pencils to Iraqi schoolchildren."

For the past several years, individuals and groups have been delivering medicine and other supplies to Iraq in defiance of the U.S. blockade. Now, members of one of those groups, Chicago-based Voices in the Wilderness, have been threatened with massive fines by the federal government for "exportation of donated goods, including medical supplies and toys, to Iraq absent specific prior authorization." Our government is harassing a peace group that takes medicine and toys to dying children: we owe these courageous activists our support.

This is not foreign policy—it is state-sanctioned mass murder. The Iraqi people are suffering because of the actions of both the Iraqi and U.S. governments, but our moral responsibility lies here in the United States. If we remain silent, we are condoning a genocide that is being perpetrated in the name of peace in the Middle East, a mass slaughter that is being perpetrated in our name.

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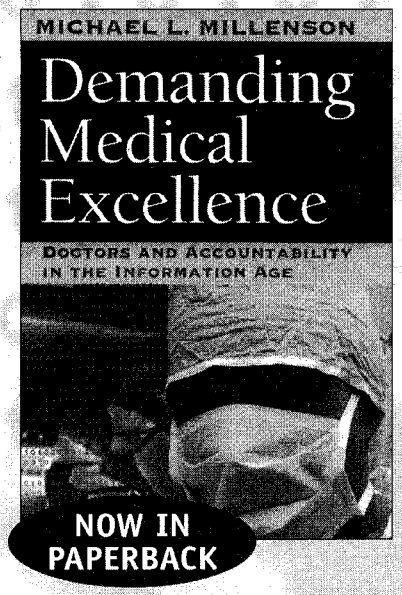
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for the ancient mummified undead who try to take up residence in her fair body. The low-budget surprise hit *The Blair Witch Project*—also created by a bunch of young cyberfreaks—juggles the hyperrealism of an ersatz documentary with eerie intimations of paranormality. The movie tells a tale of three bickering student filmmakers lost in the woods as they film their own pursuit of the truth behind the legends surrounding the disappearance of some local children. When one member of the team, unhinged as much by the incessant presence of the camera as by the mounting evidence of a hidden hand impeding their progress, complains, "I can see why you like this video camera so much. It's not quite reality—you can pretend everything's not quite the way it is," he's not just expressing mistrust of the techno-toys his generation is so obsessed with but a profound malaise with an unstructured world that offers him no guidance or passion.

Perhaps the biggest (and pleasantest) surprise of 1999 was the stunning success of *The Sixth Sense*. It, too, dabbles in the beyond: A troubled little boy is haunted by the ghosts of those who return from the dead with unfinished business to transact. To him they've become more substantial than the young thugs who daily torment him at school, and in the end he befriends and helps them so they can rest in peace. For all its traffic with the supernatural, this soulful movie's finest achievement is its unsentimental yet compassionate portrayal of the fluid borders of the modern family. Deeply loved by his brave, brassy, imperfect single mother, the boy takes his fathering wherever he can, finding relief in the company of an equally troubled child psychologist who may or may not be dead himself. *The Sixth Sense* was one of the few big films of 1999 with anything—or anything halfway intelligent—to say about the domestic sphere. That is, unless you count *Big Daddy*, a movie so thuddingly awful and so riddled with bad faith that one can only assume it coasted into the top ten on the strength of Adam Sandler's 1998 hit, *The Waterboy*. Dolled up in transgressive attitude—Sandler's unhero is a slacker with gay friends, a limitless supply of hooter jokes and a belligerently unorthodox approach to parenting the 5-year-old boy who lands on his doorstep—the movie soon unravels into a cloying adoption yarn in which biological parentage triumphs and Sandler, having renounced his claim to fatherhood, gets hitched to a go-getting lawyer and becomes a dad through "legit" channels.

That the list boasts one lonely romantic comedy (*The Runaway Bride*) in part reflects the studios' unwillingness to entertain movies for audiences old enough to be interested in matrimony. It also hints at public anxiety about the fragility of love and marriage. Resting all too comfortably on the enormous (and enormously undeserved) success of *Pretty Woman*, the movie reunites Richard Gere and Julia Roberts, this time as a smugly sexist New York journalist and a small-town hardware saleswoman who has charmed hordes of men into proposing, only to bolt at the altar every time. It's hardly cheering that this premise, presumably director Garry Marshall's idea of a feminist reversal, resonated with enough female moviegoers, and the dates they dragged with them, to make the top ten. Divorced because, in the psycho-babbling argot that clogs the movie's screenplay, he failed to "see" his first wife, Gere remedies the situation by "seeing" Roberts clearly enough to set her straight about who she is and what she wants. Under his smirking tutelage, Roberts's liberation will be achieved when she, not her prospective spouses, decides how she likes her eggs done. If there's anything at all intriguing about *The Runaway Bride*, it's the way the movie ties itself in knots trying to reconcile hard-pressed ideals of love for love's sake, culled from that vanishing breed, the romantic comedy, with the psychotherapeutic bromides about sober maturity that are the preachy trademarks of the TV movie.

Gere's conversion to wedded bliss is about as convincing as the gaga, Rockwellian small-town community his bride inhabits. Indeed, only two of the top-ten movies boast anything resembling a credibly working *Gemeinschaft*. One is the solidary, cooperative society of apes in *Tarzan*, for which the good humans abandon civilization, a Hobbesian world filled with predators bent on raping nature for profit. The other, in the delightful *Toy Story 2*, falls into place when Andy's old-fashioned toys band together to rescue one of their number—cowboy Woody—from an avaricious Collector. Woody must choose between a comfortable but frozen immortality as an objet d'art in a Japanese museum and the real-life dangers of remaining dependent on a child who may one day grow up and forget him. Naturally the toys decide that "life's only worth living if you're loved by a kid," but the affirmation of their final cry that

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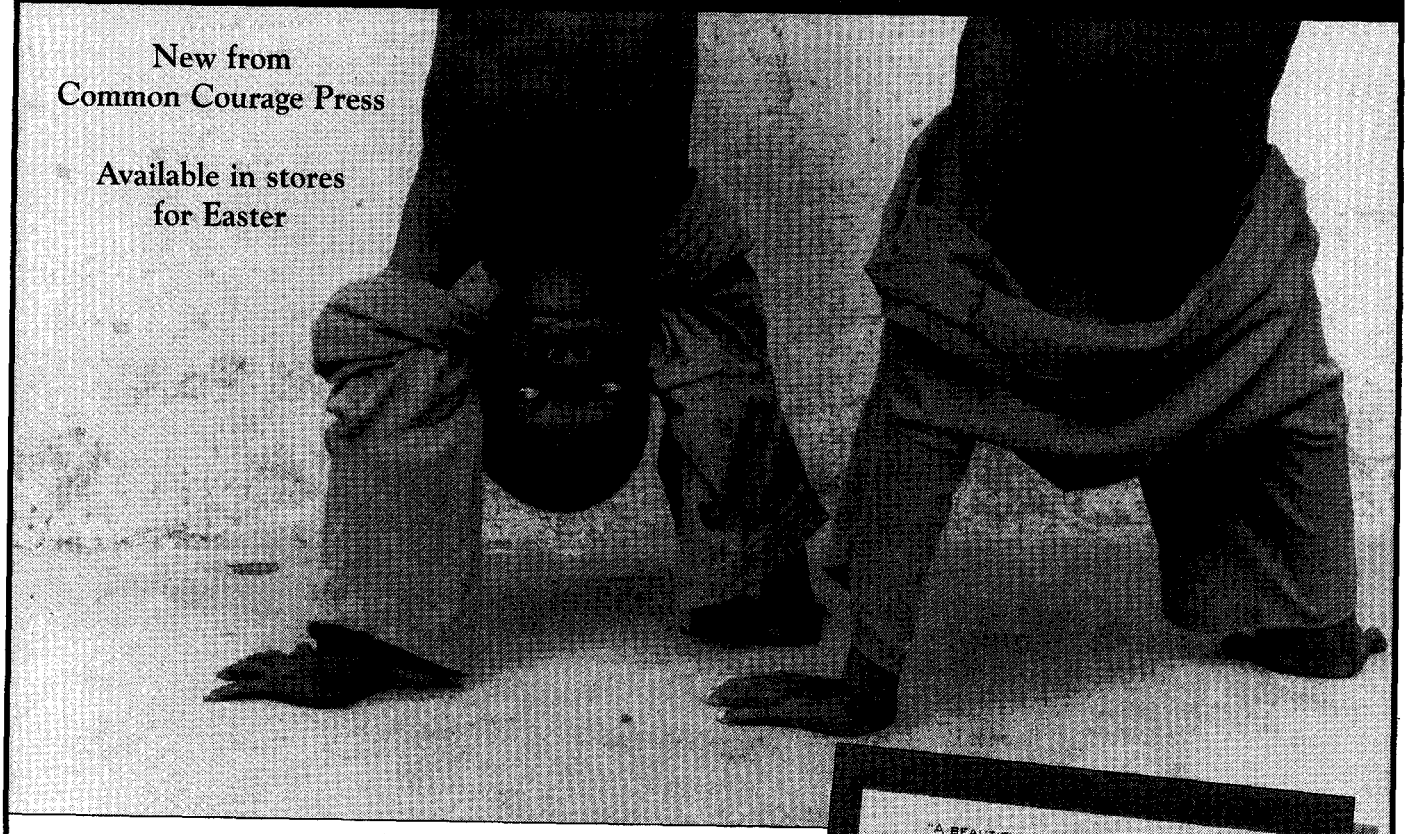

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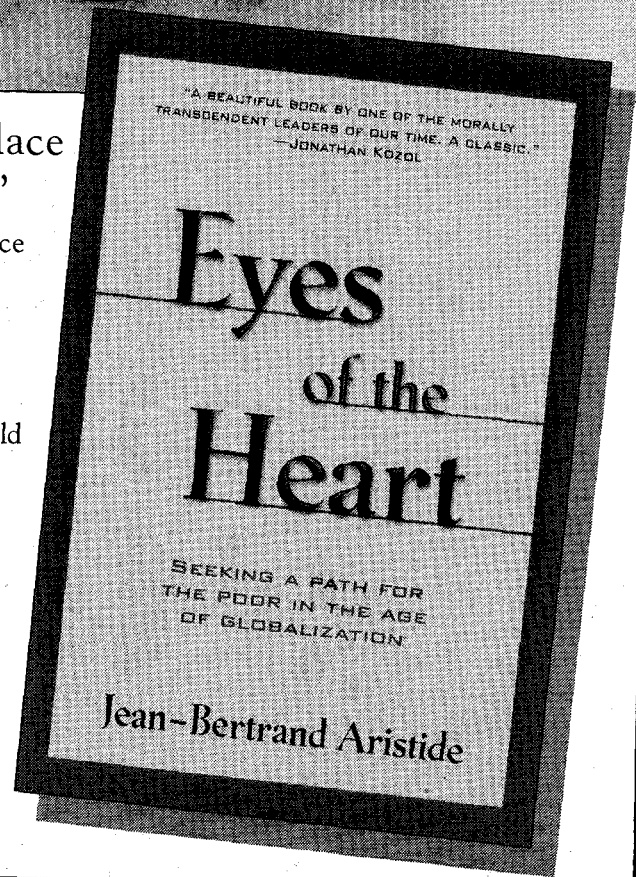
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"We're part of a family again" is undercut by a nightmarish earlier scene straight out of Walter Benjamin, in which Buzz Lightyear enters a hellish building cloned from Toys 'R' Us and finds himself marooned on a shelf amid hundreds of shiny replicas of himself, one of whom tries to usurp him and so derail the effort to rescue Woody. Thus does *Toy Story 2* emerge as a work of art fashioned by the agents of mechanical reproduction. And now I suppose you'll be expecting me to extract nuggets of potent social meaning from *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*. Get away with you. Even a film critic has her dignity. ■

Robert Kramer, Expatriate

A Filmmaker's Radical Journey, 1939–1999

PETER GESSNER

Robert Kramer, an American filmmaker who lived in France for the past twenty years, died suddenly last November outside Paris at the age of 60. At his death, he was considered by critics in Europe to be "a principal figure in the history of contemporary cinema" (*Le Monde*). His body of work, however, remains largely unknown in this country. Of his impressive output—more than two dozen films, matched in quantity only by directors like Godard, Fassbinder and a few others—at least three will remain signposts of their (and our) times: *Ice* (1969), a feverish look at a semifictional America in the midst of armed civil war; *Milestones* (1975), a *cinéma vérité* examination of the personal and political choices facing members of his generation; and *Doc's Kingdom* (1987), a moody story about an American political activist beached in Portugal. The three constitute what Kramer liked to call "a single, long film." Although his films were obdurately rhetorical, talky and intensely personal, they grew out of an often autocritical and fiercely uncompromising vision. The reasons for Kramer's eclipse in his home country and his simultaneous ascendance abroad have as much to do with the cultural and political trajectory of the past twenty years as with the films themselves.

Kramer was part of a generation of activists and filmmakers that came of age politically and aesthetically in the sixties. In that long-gone, almost Jurassic world, distinctions between what was political and what was art were collapsing before our eyes. As filmmakers, we felt no chasm between our love of the high cinema art of Welles, John Ford and Kurosawa and the free-form explosions of edgier filmmakers like Godard, John Cassavetes, Kenneth Anger, Bruce Baillie and Robert Frank. Our temples of learning were the New Yorker and Bleecker Street theaters, Jonas Mekas's 42nd Street basement venue and free press screenings at the New York Film Festival. Our reading ranged from the English-language edition of *Cahiers du cinéma* to the more mundane pages of the latest *American Cinematographer*. In those days, everything was wondrously in flux, and all streams seemed to converge into one creative river.

Kramer entered this world partly at my urging. In 1965 I was working in Manhattan as an assistant film editor for several blacklisted filmmakers who had formed their own small production company. One day a nervous Venezuelan student wandered into the office with raw footage of the nascent guerrilla movement in his country. Everyone was too busy, and the task was given to me to turn it into a film. I had never edited a film on my own and knew next to nothing about Latin America. I remembered that Robert—whom I had known from grade school and college—had recently been traveling on his own in Latin America. An intelligent narration needed to be written, and I knew he could write well. We finished the film—called *FALN* after the initials of the guerrilla group—and, perhaps somewhat melodramatically, took pseudonyms as credits (Robert Kramer inverted became "Robert Remark," while I opted for my middle name: "Peter David"). In retrospect, the film tends to swim in youthful romanticism for what we later learned was a politically marginal group; Robert, however, always proudly listed it as the first film in his filmography.

Robert never denied his relatively privileged background as the son of a Park Avenue heart specialist, who went to Manhattan private schools, Swarthmore College and, later, Stanford. In fact, he picked at it like a scab, uncovering and examining his personal contradictions both in his conversations and in his films. After *FALN* was completed in 1965, he joined Tom Hayden and other members of Students for a Democratic Society in a community-organizing project in the Newark ghetto. It was a charged situation—Newark, like other American ghettos during this decade, would explode in violence the following year—and Kramer was part of a group of largely white middle-class activists parachuting into this world. The resultant ambiguities are brilliantly explored in Norman Fruchter and Robert Machover's *Troublemakers*, a film chronicle of the efforts of Kramer and the other organizers attempting to navigate these hazards. Kramer then embarked on what would be the first of many fiction films, *In the Country* (1966), dealing with the isolation of a middle-class radical activist, which Jonas Mekas personally took to the Pesaro Festival that year.

That effectively launched Kramer's career. Over the next thirty years he would become one of a few American filmmakers making long-form, low-budget feature films with political themes. The following year, Kramer, Fruchter and other filmmakers, including myself, met at what was then the Free University on 14th Street to form a group to make short politicial films designed to be rapidly disseminated across the country. The group, known as Newsreel, eventually established branches

Peter Gessner lives in San Francisco, where he is currently working on a book about his second career as a private investigator.

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in Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Boston. Made with minimal financing and crude equipment—sometimes strident, often visually arresting—the early Newsreel films dealt with protests at the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City, the formation of the Black Panthers and the shutdown of Columbia University. In 1969 Kramer, Fruchter and John Douglas traveled to North Vietnam and brought back footage that became *People's War* (1969), one of the only documentaries shot there by Americans.

Kramer's other contribution to Newsreel was his physical presence and the force of his personality. With his jet-black hair, dark good looks and penchant for tight T-shirts, he presented himself to the world as a young Marlon Brando. He loved to stand up in front of puzzled middle-class audiences and explain why a scratchy, out-of-focus print they had just seen was "a symbol of our struggle." By the time he had finished, they were persuaded they had just seen something like Luis Buñuel's *L'Age D'Or*. His politics seemingly derived from a stew of Marx, Herbert Marcuse and Frantz Fanon; it was a heady, romantic mixture, and later when he went to live communally in Vermont, he would write about the gun he kept next to his bed. A woman who was a Newsreel member recently recalled Robert in these terms: "He was a compelling, absurd, charming and inspiring character—one of the most self-created and fascinating I've met."

The next decade was not kind to radical filmmakers, including Kramer. When the movement that supported and used political films imploded and the long Carter/Republican nightmare took hold, Kramer left the country and established himself in Paris. Although he was able to work and produce films with the assistance and support of the government and national television, he fundamentally remained in uneasy exile. The years blurred into two decades, but the move somehow never seemed quite permanent. It was nevertheless an incredibly creative time during which Kramer produced the bulk of his films, including *Doc's Kingdom* and *Route One* (1989). Although there were a few admitted failures—like *Diesel* (1985), his one attempt at a big-budget-thriller format, and *Our Nazi* (1984), made with Thomas Harlan (son of Veidt Harlan, author of the notorious Nazi propaganda film *Jud Süss*), which got bogged down in recriminations and lawsuits—some of his films from this period are acknowledged by those who have seen them to be less talky and tendentious than his earlier work. They managed to breathe.

Like others of his generation, Robert found no comfortable point of re-entry, no going back after coming of age in a society which had waged a brutal, ten-year war abroad and repressed its citizens of color at home. Film and political culture, once a primordial sea, had drawn back into separate and distinct tributaries, fordable only at great personal and professional risk.

As he approached his 60th birthday, Robert recalled to friends that his father had died in his mid-50s, and he remarked that he had no role model to guide him in his final decade. It is sad to realize that he will not have another ten or twenty years to find out what the journey had in store for him or for the rest of us concerned with the junction of film and politics. ■

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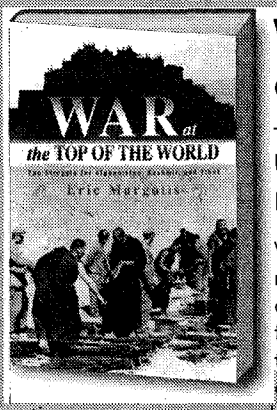

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From *Vertigo* to *Austin Powers*, Scenes We Love

BY MANOHLA DARGIS

It's a familiar parlor game to ask one another to name our favorite movies. For those who take movies seriously, the answer can mean anything from deepened friendships to feelings of betrayal. Yet specific scenes often mean even more than specific titles: Cherished movie scenes divulge more personal truths than entire films, which, with their narrative plenty, can easily obscure an embarrassment of personal fetishes, obsessions and fears. Knowing this, and for reasons that are perhaps more voyeuristic than intellectual or political, we asked a handful of women to describe a scene in a movie that they felt provided the best insight into the relationship between the sexes. As expected, the answers were far-ranging. They were also, by turns, funny, caustic, cynical and generous. It would be presumptuous to think that these scenes reveal everything about these women, save that each looks at movies with her eyes wide open, and quite a few of them had sex on the brain.

★

FRANCINE PROSE, *novelist.*

The very first scene in Jean Renoir's *Rules of the Game* when the flier lands after his daring and dangerous flight and notices that the married woman he loves isn't there. Suddenly all his accomplishments seem like nothing. He has no interest in the reporters and the huge adoring crowd; it all seems like ashes. I first saw the film when I was 20 and I didn't get it. I thought, What's wrong with these people, why don't they just do what they want and say what they want? I've seen it again probably about every five years, and each time it makes more sense to me. I have to say that my second choice is the scene from *Vertigo* in which Jimmy Stewart realizes that he can turn Judy into Madeleine. That was a revelation. I thought, Oh my God, there's this incredibly fetishistic imprinting that goes on and people really do have their type and the actual person behind the type doesn't matter. There's some physical thing that goes on and men are looking for something in women that has nothing to do with who the women are. I saw that at about the same time as *Rules of the Game*, and let me tell you, I got that one right away.

★

ESTHER DYSON, *pundit and author of* Release 2.1: A Design for Living in the Digital Age *(Broadway).*

My all-time favorite is when Jack Nicholson finally kisses Faye Dunaway in *Chinatown*, because it's funny as well as incredibly passionate. He's got that Band-Aid on his nose and we've been waiting for this to happen for a long, long time. They don't hop to the kiss the first time they see each other, it comes quite late, it makes it much more interesting, there's a lot more tension. It took a long way to get there and it's clear it's not going to be easy, either. The kiss doesn't resolve anything at all. I love that whole movie, it's so rich and so evil.

★

NELL IRVIN PAINTER, *historian; author of* Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol *(Norton).*

I have so much trouble going to movies because I spend so much of my life surrounded by white people and being "on" that it's not entertaining to go to the movies and see a lot of white people unless it's a really good film. For a movie to touch me it either has to have intimacy or black people in it. There are several moving scenes in *Passion Fish*. The male lead, Vondie Curtis-Hall—he's the handsomest man in the world. *Whoa*. Certainly he's the sexiest male in the world. I like the scenes with the white guy and his children because some of the happiest moments I've seen with my husband are those with his children. Those were nice scenes, but every scene with Alfre Woodard and Vondie Curtis-Hall—just lovely.

★

KARYN KUSAMA, *filmmaker. Her first feature,* Girlfight, *shared the top award for best dramatic feature at this year's Sundance Film Festival; it opens later this summer.*

There's a sexual frankness and open chemistry in the second getting-to-know-you scene between Piper Laurie and Paul Newman at the bus station in *The Hustler*. What's beautiful is that it's clear that she's quite intelligent, might even have a handle on him being less intelligent. You also get the sense right away just from the way that she drinks, and what happens to her rapidly as she drinks a lot, that she's really messed up. It's very powerful to see Paul Newman struck by her instead of the floozies he later meets. There's something very real about him attempting to coexist with this woman and accept her tenderness and offer his own.

★

LIZ PHAIR, *musician.*

One of the truest relationships is between Margo Channing and her boyfriend in *All About Eve*. They are totally in love but you don't necessarily know that in the beginning. You're not given assurances, until that moment that I love—being a kind of fiery woman in a relationship myself—when he's got Margo on the bed after she's come into the audition. Eve has performed brilliantly and your heart is sinking and Margo is pretending like she doesn't know and is smoking her cigarettes and he grabs her and throws her on the bed and he's shaking her and saying, "I love you! Don't you get it? I'm in love with you." He's telling her, to her face, who she is. It doesn't matter how heinously she be-

Manohla Dargis is the film critic for Harper's Bazaar *and film editor for the* LA Weekly. *Special thanks to Alison Mann.*

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haves, he is in love with her. Her. It can't be Eve, it can't be the next person just like Margo or better or younger, it's her. So often there's a sort of mathematical way that Hollywood does things. You can always tell who's going to get together and who's not. This is a movie about a woman who is behaving monstrously and a man who is being an ignoramus, but they love each other and nothing in the plot can damage that. You don't have to be a good girl to be loved, you don't have to behave the way Hollywood formulas want you to behave. I find that inspiring.

★

SANDRA BERNHARD, *performer.*

The scene in *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* in which they're all ready to have their supposed tryst and they all just lose it. The guys can't get their hard-ons and the women all feel completely shut down. I think that probably sums up the relationship between men and women—the bravado, the come-ons, the possibilities, the fantasies and then, when it comes down to it, for a lot of people, this empty experience.

★

MARGARET CHO, *comedian.*

The relationship between Brandon and Lana in *Boys Don't Cry* was so what I want from young love, the love scenes were so beautiful. In a lot of love scenes today there's really a focus on people's bodies, you don't really see people's faces. The camera lingered on Lana's face in such a lovely way; it was so intimate, and, to me, that's what sex between men and women is about. It's so strange because the biological reality was that it was a woman and a woman, though not really. It was a wonderful way to express gender as being not biological but about your soul and who you are and who you feel you are. I cried from beginning to end because I wanted a boyfriend like Brandon Teena. I feel like a jaded viewer a lot of times, and when I can be really moved by something onscreen in that way it's really important, and I do think it has a lot to do with the fact that the film was directed by a woman. We do have a different perspective when it comes to sexuality, things are felt differently by the body and therefore expressed differently in our artwork.

★

ROZ CHAST, *cartoonist for* The New Yorker *and illustrator for* The Mink Was Already Dead: And Other Rationalizations *(Workman).*

There are so many great things in *Annie Hall* about the nature of falling in love, how at the beginning you're so totally in love and then what happens when it starts to turn. Part of the reason the lobster scene works so well is that Allen does the scene again at the end after he's broken up with Diane Keaton. He goes out with another girl and it's a repeat of the same thing. The lobster has somehow gotten away and he's having a panic fit, swinging around the broom. With Keaton it was so horrible yet so hilarious and wonderful. Here's the scene again with a woman who just says, Why are you making such a big deal about it? I was thinking about what movies take on the subject of male-female relationships best, and I was also thinking about *Alien*. The thing with *Alien*—and this has been said a million times—but the central horror in it is the idea of the thing growing inside you, which of course is pregnancy. In a way, it's the horror that a man must feel. Even though I have had two children, sometimes when I think about pregnancy, it does seem very alien-like to me. It didn't seem so at the time, but now when I think about it, I think EEW!

★

JOAN CHEN, *actor and director.*

The scene that came into my head was from *The Bridges of Madison County*. I was moved deeply by this one moment when the husband tells the wife that he knows she had other dreams, other wishes, and that he's sorry he couldn't give those to her. The husband is a tiny character, you don't even remember his face, but when he says that, you almost want to know his side of the story. He knew there were yearnings, one year or two years

★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★

'You don't have to be a good girl to be loved. I find that inspiring.'

—Liz Phair

★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★

or a few years where she wasn't part of the family, where she was somewhere else. But he allowed it. She, of course, sacrifices the so-called greatest love because she doesn't want her husband to be ridiculed. The things we are willing to give up for this very mysterious, age-old union between a man and a woman—that moved me.

★

JUDITH HALBERSTAM, *theorist; author, with Del LaGrace Volcano, of* The Drag King Book *(Serpent's Tail).*

I like the penis-enlarger scene in *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* between Mike Myers and Elizabeth Hurley because it's this amazing moment where the guy is shown to be phallically insufficient and the scene proceeds anyway. In fact, the comedy and the romance purls from his being phallically insufficient, which I think is a new moment in heterosexual comedy. My theory is that Austin Powers is actually a drag king. He has fake hair, fake teeth, and the scene is all about the fact that he isn't a phallic male. He doesn't just come fully formed from *Casino Royale*, the James Bond films, the "carry-on" comedies. The reason you get an Austin Powers in the nineties is because of all of the alternative forms of male parody. In this age of male crises, when Susan Faludi is writing a tragic tome about the betrayal of the American male, it was refreshing to see that sort of betrayal turned into comedy, where the woman's desire is actually activated by the male's insufficiency. Critics bemoan the crisis in masculinity, but those same critics aren't aware of the rise in alternative masculinities in places like lesbian nightclubs, where there are these amazing drag-king performances that prove it's very, very easy to imitate masculinity. You have to tie the exhaustion of heteronormativity to the rise of alternative ways of being. It didn't just happen on its own. *Austin Powers* is the ur-text of the millennium. ■

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Arianna's Revolution

Throwing Parties, Overthrowing Governments

By DAVID CORN

Most everyone in Hollywood who gives a damn about politics eventually makes it to the home of Arianna Huffington, the onetime conservative celebrity/pundit. Since moving from Washington to California in 1997, Huffington has turned her Brentwood house into something of a political salon. It's the Rick's place of LA politicos. And, increasingly, it's been a hangout for progressives. Huffington has thrown book parties for Jesse Jackson and Jesse Jackson Jr. (*It's About the Money*), Randall Robinson (*The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*) and yours truly (*Deep Background*, a political suspense novel). She hosted a dinner for Ellen Miller of Public Campaign, which advocates full public financing of elections. During another dinner at her house the semi-serious idea of Warren Beatty staging a progressive-minded presidential campaign was hatched. (She also feted John McCain at her home.) During one soiree, staff of the local Pacifica radio station mingled with studio development executives.

Huffington's left-leaning socializing is not suprising if one reads her latest book, *How to Overthrow the Government*. In it, she declares, "American politics is broken—under the thumb of a small corporate elite using its financial clout to control both parties' political agendas." Those who remember her as the wife of Michael Huffington, an oil-heir California Republican who in 1992 bought a seat in Congress by spending a record $5.4 million of his own money and who then, two years later, dropped $30 million in a loss to Senator Dianne Feinstein, or who recall Arianna as a prominent Newt-backer in the heady days of the so-called Republican Revolution, might be taken aback by this volume. In a recent column, Katha Pollitt sneered at Huffington for "repackaging" herself and criticized me for writing favorably about her. (Some lefties, alas, would rather have targets than allies, maintain enemies rather than welcome converts.) But Huffington has been edging toward a neoprogressive populist politics for several years.

In the book's preface Huffington explains that during her husband's 1994 Senate effort she was shocked—shocked!—to find that "modern campaigns...are so thoroughly dominated by pollsters and consultants that there's no oxygen left for ideas that might challenge the status quo." As for Gingrich, she claims she took him at his word when he maintained he was looking for daring proposals to help the poor and fancied her ideas on this front. "I was completely fooled," she writes. "Her break with Newt is one key to her change," says leftist-turned-rightist author David Horowitz, who has been her friend for several years. He adds, "I'm disappointed in her new book, for it deploys a lot of conventional liberal wisdom. Ralph Nader could have written it. But she is a maverick." Andrew Breitbart, a former Huffington researcher, has a slightly different take. "People who say something bizarre is going on with Arianna have not been paying attention to her writings of the past few years, which contain serious looks at social problems. Her focus and diagnosis are left-of-center, but she is interested in trying to find solutions that rise above the right-left system."

Huffington's chief complaint is that in this era of plenty, 35 million Americans live in poverty, while the Democratic/Republican duopoly, thoroughly corrupted by special-interest contributions, does little to address this tragedy. Recently, Huffington notes, she was asked what could be done to raise the profile of poverty in this country: "'Put a Republican back in the White House,' I replied—not because he would do more for the poor, but because it might inspire the champions of the Left"—meaning the Democrats—"to reunite with estranged consciences and regain their voices."

In her book she proposes an ambitious program that includes public financing of elections, civil disobedience and protests like the anti-WTO actions in Seattle, same-day voter registration and boycotts of corporations that do not donate to people in need. In grandiose fashion, she's been trying to spark what she calls a movement "to overthrow the government." In Boston, she and Mass Voters for Clean Elections dumped ballot boxes with "dirty money" into the harbor. In Washington she lobbied Capitol Hill with *Sojourner*'s Jim Wallis, who oversees the Call to Renewal, an interfaith campaign to end poverty. In Santa Monica she held a rally with the Oaks Project, a Nader-founded citizenship group that runs local campaigns to promote political reform and improve healthcare. (A busload of at-risk children from South Central attended this event. "We wanted to show that campaign finance reform is not just a process issue," Huffington remarks, "but that the way we finance campaigns affects millions of lives.") In Northern California she joined a protest with people opposed to Proposition 21, which mandates tougher punishments for youthful offenders. Profits from the book, she says, will be donated to progressive groups. Through a website (www.overthrowgov.com) she is promoting "The Manifesto," a slightly simplistic list of eleven "things you can do right now to start overthrowing the government." Among them: volunteer, push for clean-money elections, hang up on pollsters, demand that candidates donate 10 percent of their contributions to poverty-fighting groups.

When Huffington first descended on Washington in the early nineties, the consensus was that she was one hell of an ambitious woman. After all, she had been the president of the debating society at Cambridge University, written five books and married a millionaire. (She and Huffington were divorced in 1997; today he is a gay Democrat.) Subsequently she almost became the first lady of Newt's Revolution, dabbled in New Age–ish philosophy, did time as a political satirist on Comedy Central. Then she built herself into a seriously regarded syndicated columnist. Now Huffington is hoping to kick-start a citizens' crusade from her LA estate. It's a noble endeavor, Comrade Huffington. Pass the hors d'oeuvres and ride on. ■

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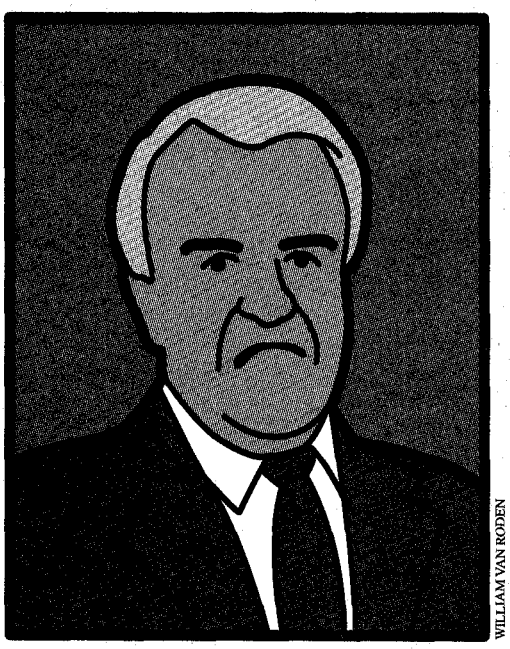
The House That Jack Built

How Valenti Brought Hollywood to the World

CARL BROMLEY

Suppose we take seriously rumors that Hollywood is planning to replace veteran Motion Picture Association of America chief Jack Valenti with Bill Clinton. In a recent interview the President joked that he would enjoy anything that allowed him to see free movies. Valenti must have been pleased when Clinton mouthed the industry mantra, telling critic Roger Ebert he believes in challenging import barriers to Hollywood's product: "I don't think they should deprive people of making the choice of coming to American movies." But what was he to think when Clinton used his recent State of the Union address to call for an overhaul of Valenti's pet TV ratings system? As a job audition it was a bust.



WILLIAM VAN RODEN

When Valenti took office at the MPAA in 1966, Clinton was only 20 and Mao's Red Guards were torching images of American pop culture. Hollywood movies were practically unseen in South Korea, while in Europe, local product dominated the screens. Today, China welcomes American films. By 1995 Hollywood was raking in $135 million from South Korea; it now enjoys an 80–90 percent market share in Europe, while national cinemas there are virtually dead. This is the tip of the iceberg. If Clinton ever does take the job he may find the shoes of his predecessor considerably harder to fill than were those of George Bush.

Movies have become synonymous with Hollywood, and Jack Valenti has had a large hand in that. On the thirtieth anniversary of Valenti's appointment, Lew Wasserman, the studio mogul who recruited him to the MPAA, was well pleased: "I don't think anyone else could have kept our often-dysfunctional family together over these three decades." During Valenti's reign, Hollywood has established a worldwide hegemony; his office describes itself as "a little State Department." When a center-left government was recently elected in Italy, the most urgent item on the US ambassador's agenda wasn't the new government's relationship with NATO or its plans to combat narcoterrorism but its prospective film policy.

But Valenti's success has created what he calls his "Maalox moments." Hollywood, with its skyrocketing budgets, low profit margins and star salary system, has come to depend on foreign markets, which now account for whatever profits the studios have been able to squeeze out of their feature film divisions. "We'd be dead without the international marketplace," Valenti said candidly in 1995. That's why, Valenti told *The Nation*, he has designated a "very, very high-level committee," consisting of the likes of Wasserman, Michael Eisner, Rupert Murdoch and Sumner Redstone, who are "committed, along with their people, to...buttonholing Congressmen" to establish permanent trade relations with China. This international démarche is clearly propelled by a deep-seated fear that America's "glittering trade prize" could take a Gibbon-like plunge into the cinematic swamp of protectionism.

During his first public outing as MPAA chief, Valenti outlined an international agenda obviously colored by his experiences as a trusted member of Lyndon Johnson's inner circle. Resembling then-vogue-ish theories of cold war liberalism concerning economic development and decolonization, Valenti's approach, as *Variety* reported, was premised on "enlarging the foreign market, by bringing US pix to emerging nations which will in time come to enjoy more leisure time, after the present 'ferment' in new nations leads to a 'more decent standard of living.'"

In an early indication of bipartisan cunning, Valenti advised LBJ to approve US Army cooperation in the making of Republican icon John Wayne's film *The Green Berets*, writing to LBJ a few months before his appointment to the MPAA: "Wayne's politics [were] wrong, but insofar as Vietnam is concerned, John Wayne's views are right. If he made the picture he would be saying the things we want said."

Valenti left an early imprint with his overhaul of the old, prudish Hays Production Code that prohibited lustful embraces, among other things (his replacement, with a few nips and tucks, still stands today). During the Nixon years he skillfully advanced two pieces of legislation—as always, relying on Wasserman's crucial backstage maneuvering—that returned the heavily indebted studios to full financial health and helped them reclaim their domestic and international clout. One, which allowed the studios to write off 7 percent (later 10 percent) of their investment in made-in-USA films, also contained tax-shelter provisions that, while they lasted, allowed the studios to defer taxes on half their overseas profits indefinitely. An even greater windfall was the Federal Communications Commission's introduction of "fin-syn rules," which give the studios, rather than the networks, the right to sell TV programming to the lucrative syndication market.

Valenti aided the studios' assault on developing Asian markets, applying the big stick to South Korea, which the MPAA accused

Carl Bromley's articles on film and politics have appeared in The Nation, In These Times *and* Cinéaste. *He is at work on a forthcoming anthology of* Nation *film writing.*

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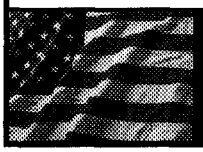

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of preventing viewers from watching Hollywood product by releasing snakes into cinemas. In the Philippines Valenti braved threats from guerrilla groups to appear as an honored guest at the First Manila International Film Festival in 1982, invited by his old friend First Lady Imelda Marcos, who hoped the festival would become the "Cannes of the East" (and prop up her and her husband's faltering kleptocracy). In his primer *Speak Up With Confidence*, he eulogized Imelda's husband, Ferdinand, as a "a compact, muscular man with heavy black hair and a flat-planed face, vaguely resembling Jack Palance, [who] was during World War II the most heroic resistance fighter in those beleaguered islands."

By the end of the eighties, a weak dollar and the fivefold growth in US film and TV sales to Europe's growing commercial television market made Valenti and the industry more bullish internationally. In Europe, Hollywood's growing domination was causing a backlash, especially among cultural and political elites. French Minister of Culture Jack Lang, who had accused the Americans of cultural imperialism in 1982, toned his rhetoric down when the Mitterrand government abandoned its early radical course—to the extent that Lang awarded Valenti the French Legion of Honor in 1984, which French film director Bertrand Tavernier described as "one of the biggest mistakes of a socialist government that made so many mistakes."

The resentment continued to simmer, and in 1989 the European Commission published *Television Without Frontiers*, which called for ceilings of 50 percent on non-European programming. Valenti and most of the industry reacted with outrage. He claimed that the EC wanted "to manacle the entry of American TV programs," even though Hollywood penetration of the European market had already plateaued at less than 30 percent. Locking arms with Bush and Clinton Trade Representatives Carla Hills and Mickey Kantor, Valenti clashed with the cream of France's filmmaking talent during the final months of the Uruguay Round of GATT negotiations. He didn't prevail. Clinton cut him loose when he realized that a treaty that institutionalized US leadership in the new World Trade Organization was worth saving, even if audiovisual products were excluded. Valenti's defeat was a result of pressure applied to the EC by a group of highly motivated European filmmakers and artist/activists. In fact, as Tavernier suggests, their December 1993 victory was a prelude to the defeat of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment and last fall's battle in Seattle.

In the wake of his GATT embarrassment and amid rumors of his retirement, Valenti launched a charm offensive against Europe. This was a kinder, gentler Jack Valenti. Styling himself a Renaissance man, he spoke of collaboration, Molière and Voltaire. He admits to "mistakes on my part of being too belligerent" during GATT and counts the reconstruction of "friendships that were a little bit shattered" as his greatest accomplishment since then. A case of keeping your friends close to you and your enemies even closer? Or does the challenge presented by "Bill Gates and video piracy" (as Tavernier puts it) mean Valenti needs to reconfigure the old transatlantic alliance? Tavernier, among others, noted that the MPAA wasn't noticeably aggressive about the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (even though it might have been to Hollywood's advantage).

With his formidable antipiracy network straddling every

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continent, Valenti's highest priority now is fighting "earthbound and cyberspace" copyright thieves whose bootlegged, high-quality DVDs and DCDs threaten, as he claims operatically, to "ravage our tomorrows." Valenti has also returned to what he does best: lubricating the wheels of the US government and cultivating good will in Washington, offering Hollywood's deep pockets to politicians who do the industry's bidding. Valenti was instrumental in introducing John McCain to key Hollywood fundraisers last year. The special movie screenings at the MPAA's small screening room are still de rigueur Beltway A-list events (which sometimes double as fundraisers for powerful committee chairmen). The MPAA has defeated struggles by the Director's Guild and the Author's Rights Foundation to assert that the director rather than the studio is the moral author of a film, and it supports the detestable practice of colorizing old movies. Congress has passed a string of MPAA-inked laws that aid Hollywood and other intellectual-property industries fighting piracy—the most dispiriting being extension of copyright on figures like Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck.

We will see whether the MPAA has the nerve to battle Europe over the inclusion of film in the WTO. Despite Valenti's assurance that he is not involved in "dissembling" toward Europe, there are signs that Hollywood is pursuing this struggle via the back door. The Croatian Director's Guild complained that Croatia offered "free access...to the Croatian audiovisual market" to US companies in return for the country's acceptance into the WTO. Romania and Poland are being threatened with trade reprisals by US trade officials if they do not stop protecting their film industry. The great Polish director Andrzej Wajda, who is being honored this year at the Oscars, described the US monopoly in Poland as "the exact opposite of freedom. It is a new form of colonialism."

But Wajda's may well be a voice in the wilderness. Although Valenti's time is nearly up, the hawkish cold-war-liberal-turned-manic-globalist has insured that the extraterritorial status of American film in the world's cinematic imagination is unassailable. As Douglas Gomery, a University of Maryland film historian and longtime Valenti watcher, says, "That every major metropolitan area on the planet is playing mostly American movies is a monument to Jack Valenti." ■

War Games

The Pentagon Wants What Hollywood's Got

BY JAMES DER DERIAN

Last August prominent political leaders, military officers and representatives from the computer and entertainment industries gathered at the University of Southern California to announce the opening of a new "Institute for Creative Technologies" (ICT). The innocuous title concealed a remarkable joint project: to produce state-of-the-art military simulations by pooling expertise, financial resources and the tools of virtual reality. Onstage for the signing ceremony and press conference were Steven Sample, president of USC; Louis Caldera, Secretary of the Army; 'Rocky' Delgadillo, deputy mayor of Los Angeles; Rick Belluzzo, CEO of Silicon Graphics; and Jack Valenti, president and CEO of the Motion Picture Association of America. Even Governor Gray Davis made an appearance, virtual and gargantuan onscreen via satellite link from the Capitol. The front rows of the auditorium were sprinkled with uniforms and suits, the military's top computer war-gamers swapping stories with executives from the entertainment industry. Toward the back of the room the major network and print media, including CNN, had installed themselves to broadcast this new alliance to the world.

After some opening remarks, USC president Sample introduced the featured speaker, the Army's Louis Caldera. Caldera mapped out the purpose and potential of a "very exciting partnership" that seemed to include just about every major LA player in high tech, higher education and high- as well as lowbrow entertainment. "This $45 million contract will fund joint modeling and simulation research and has high-value applications for the Army as well for the entertainment, media, video game, film, destination theme park and information-technology industries that are such a key part of the California economy.... This partnership will leverage the US national defense and the enormous talent and creativity of the entertainment industry and their tremendous investment in cutting-edge applications of new technology." Having stroked the local powers, Caldera addressed the needs of his own constituency, in the now-common military language that makes *Neuromancer* sound like an out-of-date Army field manual. "The ICT will significantly enhance complex interactive simulations for large-scale warfighting exercises and allow us to test new doctrines in synthetic environments that are populated with intelligent agents in future threat challenges." The speakers who followed parroted the press releases in simpler language. "Synergy" and "verisimilitude" popped up with cue-card frequency; everyone was keen to dance on the "cutting edge."

But while the soldiers and politicians vied for media attention, the guy who made it all happen hugged the auditorium wall. The only evidence of his affiliation was a government pay-scale suit, a loud haw-hawing at the speakers' jokes and a slight rolling of the eyes at questions asked by the press. The ICT is the brainchild of Mike Macedonia, son of one of the Army's best war-gamers, graduate of West Point and now chief scientist and technical director at STRICOM (Simulation, Training and Instrumentation Command), the newest and probably the most unusual command post in the military. Thirty miles northeast of the pink arches of Disneyworld in Orlando, Florida, STRICOM looks like a research park pretending to be a military base. Steel and glass corporate

James Der Derian, who teaches at Brown University and the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, is the author of the forthcoming book Virtuous War *(Perseus).*

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buildings, owned by Lockheed Martin, Silicon Graphics, Westinghouse, SAIC and other military industries, encircle the various headquarters of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force. Charged with providing the military with a "vision for the future," STRICOM leads a combined military and industry effort to create "a distributed computerized warfare simulation system" and to support "the 21st century warfighter's preparation for real world contingencies." Its motto is telling: "All But War Is Simulation."

Under the auspices of his boss, Michael Andrews, deputy assistant secretary of the Army for research and technology, Macedonia brought STRICOM to LA after he realized that the commercial sector—in particular the film, computer and video-game industries—was outstripping the military in technological innovation. Where trickle-down from military research on mainframe computers once fueled progress in the field, civilian programmers working on PCs could now design video games and virtual environments that put military simulations to shame. Macedonia came to Hollywood to find the tools and skills for simulating and, if necessary, fighting wars of the future. As the blood and iron of traditional war gave way to the bits and bytes of infowar, netwar and cyberwar, he saw the ICT as a vehicle for integrating the simulation and entertainment industries into this much-heralded "Revolution in Military Affairs."

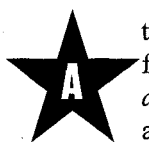
Macedonia's initiative draws on a long tradition. Ever since nineteenth-century chemists began to fix images on film made with the same nitrocelluloids found in explosives, the military and the movie industry have been in a technological relay race for seeing and killing the enemy while securing and seducing the citizen. Gun and camera became a single calibration with the mobilization of Hollywood during the Second World War. At the start of the war, military-preparedness documentaries were quickly re-edited to produce propaganda movies like *To the Shores of Tripoli*. Famous Hollywood directors soon joined the cause, contributing feature and training films like Howard Hawks's *Air Force* (1943), John Huston's *The Battle of San Pietro* (1945) and Frank Capra's series *Why We Fight* (1943–45). The War Department supplied manpower, equipment and funding, and Hollywood provided actors, directors and, for the most part, the talent. Between 1939 and 1945, close to 2,500 war movies were made.

fter such extensive collaboration, the opening of the Institute for Creative Technologies might appear to be another case of incest, just further proof that LA has never had much of a purchase on reality, rather than a cause for alarm. But there is a difference. By its very task and potential power to create totally immersive environments where one can see, hear, perhaps even touch and emotionally interact with digitally created agents, the ICT is leading the way into a brave new world that threatens to breach the last firewalls between reality and virtuality.

Set in the larger technostrategic scheme of things, ICT matters—very much. The diplomatic and military policies of the United States have become increasingly dependent on technological and representational forms of discipline, deterrence and coercion that might be described as "*virtuous war*." At the cyborg heart of virtuous war is the technical capability and ethical imperative to threaten and, if necessary, actualize violence from a distance with virtually no casualties.

On the surface, virtuous war cleans up the discourse of conflict. Fought in the same manner as they are represented, by real-time surveillance and TV "live feeds," virtuous wars promote a vision of bloodless, humanitarian, hygienic wars. This is not to say—and this point requires emphasis—that virtuous war is any less destructive, deadly or bloody for those on the short end of the big technological stick. One needs only to note the skewed casualty rates of prototypical virtuous wars like the Gulf War (287 Americans lost their lives—many by accidents), the Mogadishu raid (eighteen Americans killed) and the Kosovo air campaign (a remarkable, casualty-free conflict for the NATO forces). We seldom hear about the other side of the casualty list: Post-Vietnam, the US military studiously avoids body counts of the enemy.

Unlike other forms of warfare, virtuous war has an unsurpassed power to commute death, to keep it out of sight, out of mind. In simulated preparations and virtual executions of war, one learns how to kill but not to take responsibility for it; one experiences "death" but not the tragic consequences of it. We now face the danger of a new kind of trauma without sight, drama without tragedy, where the lines between war and game, pain and pleasure, fact and fiction do not blur: They pixelate in hyperreal detail on the same screen. In this context, when the Pentagon and Hollywood announce a new collaboration, we best tune in.



t the closed luncheon following the press conference, the writer and director John Milius (*Apocalypse Now*, *Red Dawn*) told war stories to an audience dining on chicken breast and "whipped goat cheese yukons." He spoke, half-jokingly, of how he wanted to put an end to the alienation between the military and the movie industry by setting up a production team for the Army that would make *Wag the Dog* look tame. That brought to mind Eisenhower's famous 1961 farewell address, when he warned of the "danger that public policy could itself become the captive of a scientific-technological elite." What would he have made of this addition of new media and entertainment industries to his "military-industrial complex"? Of new technologies of simulation being built at universities to create a high fidelity between the representation and the reality of war? Of the human mimetic faculty for entertainment and gaming joining forces with new cyborg programs for killing and warring? He'd probably not have let it get in the way of his golf game. By the end of the visit, I was left wondering, *pace* Eisenhower, if the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment network had just gone online.

Six months after the fact, I'm not so sure. My effort to find out just what was in the works at ICT produced more promissory notes than any actual project developments. The reasons given for not going on record were ongoing negotiations and imminent signings, with "one of the best-known directors in Hollywood" and some of the "best computer graphics guys on the planet." The only names dropped were Randal Kleiser (director of *The Blue Lagoon* and *Honey, I Blew Up the Kid*) and 3D Realms, makers of the video game Duke Nukem (motto: "The only good alien bastard is a dead alien bastard").

One person willing to talk on the record was Mike Zyda, chairman of Modeling, Virtual Environments & Simulation at the Naval Postgraduate School, chairman of the original 1997 National Research Council report that gave cause and code for

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TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

Hollywood's new diet phenomenon

Lose up to 10 lbs this weekend!

The Hollywood "Miracle" diet features delicious, all-natural juices that help you lose weight while you cleanse, detoxify and rejuvenate your body.

by Pete Johnson

How often have you wasted precious time and money trying to lose weight? Let's see...I've tried every quick-fix, fad diet known to man...even tried the ones where you buy the pre-packaged food. They all seem to take months to show any results...and by that time my motivation is gone! Even straight fasting didn't work for me. Then I read about the Hollywood 48-Hour Miracle Diet and decided to try it—I had nothing to lose but weight—and I did!

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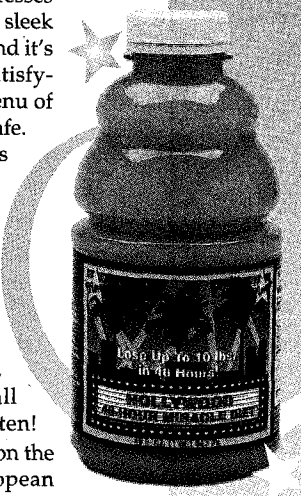

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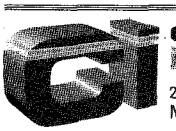

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the establishment of the ICT (*Modeling and Simulation*, http://books.nap.edu/catalog/5830.html) and, not coincidentally, chairman of Mike Macedonia's 1995 computer science PhD dissertation committee. Zyda originally envisioned the ICT as a place that would act as coordinator and broker for the most imaginative and technically advanced modelers and simulators. "The Defense Department," he says, "has spent millions and still can't match SimCity." ICT shouldn't be chasing Hollywood, says Zyda. It should target off-the-shelf videogame technology, like Sony Playstation2: Capable of generating 66 million polygons per second, it leaves platforms like Silicon Graphics in the dust. Commercial video games could be redesigned to test the intellectual aptitude and psychological attitudes of potential military recruits. Spin-off technology would be used to help kids at risk explore potential career paths.

Richard Lindheim, who was eventually appointed director of ICT, has a different vision. After a long career at NBC, Lindheim went on to become executive vice president of the Paramount Television Group, producing *The Equalizer* and taking charge of the later *Star Trek* series, *Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine* and *Voyager*. I caught up with him at STRICOM, where he was preparing for a series of Washington briefings. His previous employment probably best explains why *Star Trek*'s total-immersion simulation, the Holodeck, kept popping up in our conversation (as well as how Herman Zimmerman, the art director of *Star Trek*, was procured to design the ICT's office space). "The ICT is on a quest to envision and prepare for the future," and, says Lindheim, "our Holy Grail is the Holodeck." Lindheim invoked writers like Jules Verne, who popularized the idea of the modern submarine and inspired scientists to turn unreality into reality; *Voyager* could do the same for ICT. By the end of our conversation, I realized that the Holodeck was not just a metaphor; it was the endgame for ICT.

The Holodeck and the Holy Grail notwithstanding, the Institute for Creative Technologies is unlikely to save (or destroy) the world. It is not yet evident that it can run a project or a battlefield simulation, let alone an intergalactic war. However, cutting edge or opening wedge, the ICT does look to be Hollywood's—and the Pentagon's—premier laboratory for virtuous war. Will this new alchemy of brass, celluloid and silicon produce a kinder, gentler, sexier cyborg, like *Voyager*'s Seven of Nine? Or will the simulations of Creative Technology turn on their creators, like Frankenstein's monster? Either way, the ICT warrants public scrutiny. ■

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BOOKS & THE ARTS

Independents' Day

STUART KLAWANS

The most important day in the history of American independent film was May 8, 1947, which witnessed the opening of a picture so personal—no, so heedlessly self-revelatory—that viewers today still blush for its author. It was not enough for him merely to finance, out of his own pocket, a filmed confession of his sexual obsessions, and to cast their living object in the lead. He also insisted on writing the film—several times over—and on seizing its direction from a succession of trained professionals, whom he first hired and then pushed aside. To preserve his autonomy, the man even chose to do what almost no one would attempt today: He distributed the film himself.

This maniac, as knowing readers will already have perceived, was David O. Selznick, and the picture was *Duel in the Sun*, a landmark of independence that cost almost $3 million more than *Gone With the Wind.* Selznick opened it in 300 theaters nationwide, making it the first big picture to be marketed using the wide-release, critic-proof method that is today's industry standard for blockbusters.

Let us now fast-forward, to use a term unavailable in 1947. "Independence" now refers to a state of film whose headquarters are said to be located either in lower Manhattan (in the offices of Miramax) or in Park City, Utah, at the Sundance Film Festival. For those who can say the words "film" and "integrity" within the same sentence, this high level of institutionalization is cause for concern.

"At the very least, one can suggest what American independent cinema is not," writes Emanuel Levy in his thoughtful and substantial book on the current scene, *Cinema of Outsiders.* "It's not avant-garde, it's not experimental, and it's not underground. With few exceptions, there is not much edge, formal experimentation, or serious challenge to dominant culture.... Postmodernism has collapsed the dialectic between high and mass culture, but who would have thought that American audiences would end up settling for an easily digestible synthesis...."

Is this a bad thing? Levy doesn't seem sure. Despite his digestive grumbling, he cheers up quickly: "The development of a viable alternative cinema, with its own institutional structure, may be one of the most exciting developments in American culture during the past two decades." Minced praise. The flatness of a landscape, as Marx once wrote, may be judged by the paltriness of what people call hills. But let's choose to agree with Levy in his happier mood. Say the bumps are towering; say the alternative is not only viable but an alternative. The fact remains: Selznick blew six and a half million on *Duel in the Sun*, plus another two million for marketing and promotion, in 1947. Run that through the Consumer Price Index, and then tell me what's so awesome about the numbers for *Pulp Fiction.*

My point, comrades, is that if you really want an oppositional culture, then you will feel that today's so-called indies ought to be more dangerous—and not only to prevailing aesthetic/political values but also to the status quo of The Business.

So why aren't the indies more challenging? Perhaps they are, or could be. To start with the aesthetic/political, I will observe that people still make low-budget

SUNDANCING. John Anderson. Avon. 268 pp. Paper $12.50.

CINEMA OF OUTSIDERS. Emanuel Levy. NYU. 600 pp. $34.95.

CELLULOID MAVERICKS. Greg Merritt. Thunder's Mouth. 464 pp. Paper $18.95.

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SPIKE, MIKE, SLACKERS & DYKES. John Pierson. Hyperion. 379 pp. Paper $12.95.

PARTY IN A BOX. Lory Smith. Gibbs-Smith. 249 pp. $24.95.

UNDERGROUND FILM. Parker Tyler. Da Capo. 265 pp. Paper $13.95.

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pictures full of formal experimentation and political defiance. Americans have made them even in the 1990s, after the US Film Festival changed its name to Sundance. I think immediately of Su Friedrich and Ernie Gehr, Yvonne Rainer and Warren Sonbert—names that are passed over quickly, if mentioned at all, in Levy's book, and are missing from Greg Merritt's wider-ranging *Celluloid Mavericks*.

Whereas Levy begins in 1977 and concentrates on the rise of the mainstream indies, Merritt begins his history in 1896 and respects no hierarchy among productions, discussing race films and porn side by side with pictures like *The Little Fugitive*, Morris Engel and Ruth Orkin's 1953 drama of a runaway boy at Coney Island. This approach allows him to include the usual references to earlier avant-garde figures such as Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, Kenneth Anger and the early Warhol, whom you find in most historical accounts of independent film. Yet for Merritt, too, anything non-narrative (or really strangely narrated) tends to drop out of the picture after the early 1970s, so that "independent film" by definition converges with conventional storytelling.

At the same time, "independent film" is made a vassal to blockbuster entertainment—again, by definition. The author of *Duel in the Sun* was not an independent but "a two-legged studio," Merritt writes, in one of many contradictions to a taxonomy that his own book proposes. Very reasonably seeking to avoid subjective judgments and hierarchies of taste, he begins by calling "independent" any film financed and produced outside of a studio, whatever the size. A "semi-indie," in his terminology, may be financed by a smaller studio, and its producers may have secured a distributor before finishing the picture.

But today's "smaller studios" are subsidiaries of the very media giants whose participation Merritt would rule out. Miramax is part of Disney; New Line belongs to Time Warner; USA Films (the former October and Gramercy) was cobbled together by Universal; Fox Searchlight is owned by a fellow named Murdoch. What's more, even for their big-budget releases, these parent corporations often rely on smaller companies to do the producing—which is why you now have to sit through the screening of as many as four logos before the picture can start.

"Two-legged studios" are more the rule than the exception in Hollywood, and practically everyone—including George Lucas—can claim to be independent. You would think, then, that one or two filmmakers who are independent of mind might risk confronting the big guys on their own turf; yet the last to try, Francis Coppola, made his bid a full two decades ago. The peculiar circumstances of his failure do not necessarily spell doom for all filmmakers. (Nor can they be tidily addressed within a mere book review. For an astute account, consult Jon Lewis's *Whom God Wishes to Destroy...: Francis Ford Coppola and the New Hollywood.*) But since his founding of a full-fledged indie studio, Zoetrope, there has been no comparable challenge to business as usual.

In the absence of such daring, or foolhardiness, the movie business has undergone a transformation that seems to me less like the rise of independence than the reconsolidation of the studio system. From the 1920s to the '50s, the major studios produced a diversified schedule: so many big-budget pictures each year, so many mid-size films, so many programmers and shorts. Today, the majors send out blockbusters and big-budget items under their own label and smaller films under the logos of their subsidiaries, "mini-majors" that operate as if independent. And so we arrive at a moment when the term "indie" is reduced in meaning to a middling feature, of more or less conventional appeal. As Julian said to the emperor: First you murdered my parents, now you belittle me as an orphan.

Perhaps the first step we can take out of the double bind is to stop fretting about the prevalence of "calling-card films." Indie lore has it that the mainstreaming of a once-feisty movement began in 1989, when *sex, lies & videotape* won the newly created Audience Award at the Sundance festival and went on to commercial success, helped along by a youngish distributor called Miramax. For a more complicated version of this history, we might refer to *Party in a Box*, a history of the Sundance festival written by Lory Smith, who was present at the creation.

In September 1978 Smith attended the original US Film Festival (which was then held in Salt Lake City) as organizer of its new-film competition. (The larger, better-funded part of the program was a retrospective.) He stayed on, in various capacities, through 1998. *Party in a Box* gives pretty much a year-by-year account of that period in American film, as seen from Utah; and though the syntax and paragraph structure are unsteady, the enthusiasm is unshakable.

Levy writes that "perhaps the greatest achievement of indies in the 1980s was to defy Reaganism," a judgment that seems sound when you ride along on Smith's memory tour. In its documentary section

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especially, the US Film Festival was politically extraordinary, showcasing films such as *Seeing Red: Stories of American Communists*, *The Good Fight: The Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War* and a portrait of Rigoberta Menchú, *When the Mountains Tremble*—and that was just in 1984. As for the feature section: Any festival that gave a screen to the young Charles Burnett has earned its place in heaven. Yet complaints of softness came up early and often. Smith reprints comments made by the festival manager himself, Tony Safford, a year *before* the advent of *sex, lies & videotape*:

"After last year's program, three respected national critics, Peter Biskind in *American Film*, John Powers in *Film Comment*, and Terrence Rafferty in *The Nation*, bemoaned the lack of originality in the films presented.... With the notable exception of *River's Edge*, we too had this sense: that American independent cinema, while gaining momentum, had lost its earlier vigor and eccentricity. 'Independent cinema,' once a partisan phrase signaling difference, had become respectable, conservative, perhaps even fashionable."

From this, we may learn the only lesson possible, that careerists and mediocrities will always be with us. Rather than worry about their presence within a scene of would-be virtue, we might do better to cheer on the real talents (never more than a handful) who manage to win an audience and even big-time distribution. David O. Russell started out low-budget and self-produced but then made *Three Kings* for Warner Bros. On *Election*, the truly independent-minded Alexander Payne got help—though scarcely enough—from Paramount Pictures and MTV. I don't know what indignities these filmmakers may have suffered or what compromises they may have been forced to swallow, but the pictures turned out pretty well.

Those who still fear money and success, even in a movie business that's been thoroughly Selznicked, might learn a similar lesson from John Pierson. A film lover who has been central to the New York scene since the seventies, Pierson is proud of winning big, so long as he can do it in good company. Best known as a producer's representative, he has helped put together the financing and distribution for such films as *Parting Glances*, *She's Gotta Have It*, *Working Girls*, *The Thin Blue Line*, *Roger & Me*, *Go Fish*, *Slacker*, *Clerks*—which is good company indeed.

Pierson's lively memoir of ten years in the film business, titled *Spike, Mike, Slackers & Dykes*, expresses understand-

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able reservations about "*Pulp Fiction* the phenomenon," which he is careful to distinguish from *Pulp Fiction* the movie. After all, you can't gross better than $100 million and spawn legions of witless imitators without doing some damage. Still, Pierson's heart is in the right place in two ways: He rejoices in every good picture he's launched, and he's pissed off that they didn't get more money and attention.

Here's the irony, Pierson says: "Everyone sees *The Piano*, yet *Ruby in Paradise* drops dead the day Jane Campion's film opens. *Pulp Fiction* nearly wipes out *Hoop Dreams* in New York on their competitive first weekend. When Harvey Weinstein says that the success of a terrific film like *The Piano* is good for everybody, he's not examining the statistics.... Indie blockbusters expand the audience for the next indie blockbuster."

The problem, then, is essentially one of market share. People don't go out to the movies as often as they used to; one trip to the theater per week now qualifies you as a fan. So when 90 percent of the people who look for "new and different" get pulled into the same picture, the other two or three indies in town literally don't have an audience. Worse still, the indie blockbuster soaks up all the talk. It defines "new and different," until the next hot movie comes along—which is why "indie" has come to have its present meaning, as a picture that's audience-friendly yet just small enough to sustain the aura of being hip.

One way to cope with this problem is to stay small, playing to niche markets from the start. That, in effect, has been the strategy of Christine Vachon, the producer of films such as *Poison*, *Swoon*, *Safe*, *Happiness*, *Kids* and (in the multiword phase of her career) *I Shot Andy Warhol* and *Boys Don't Cry*. I will make big pictures, Vachon writes with unchallengeable logic in her book *Shooting to Kill*, when somebody gives me a whole lot of money to do a film about a sympathetic pedophile.

Although it includes plenty of anecdote, Vachon's memoir differs from Pierson's and Smith's in being a how-to rather than a tell-all. Listen to her carefully—her coauthor, critic David Edelstein, has done a wonderful job of catching her tone—and you will learn the basics of everything from budget-reading to location management. (Among her useful tips: Hire Teamsters to drive your trucks. It's a lot safer on every level.) You will also hear expressed, in the most disarming way, a certain clubbiness, which is the legacy of underground cinema to the indies.

The peepshow cinema, Parker Tyler called it in his invaluable work of critical history, *Underground Film*. Written in the late 1960s, at another moment when the eccentric and vigorous had turned into the overhyped and commercial, *Underground Film* proposed that a basic fact of social psychology underlay much of the avant-garde: People want to see the forbidden. Whatever artistic theorizing may have accompanied the development of the American avant-garde cinema, up through the moment when Warhol popularized the movement, a fundamental dirty-mindedness animated these pictures.

But what happened when there were no more forbidden sights—when John Waters perfected the *cinéma du gross-out* in *Pink Flamingos*, and sensible commentators realized it was just innocent fun for kids? Eventually, violations of taboos gave way to affirmations of identity; "avant-garde" became "independent." As Lory Smith reminds us, the Sundance festival started out as a promotion of regional filmmaking, with the idea that people outside Los Angeles and New York ought to be able to present themselves onscreen. (Who knew that so many of them were dying to leave behind their authentic folkways and go work in Hollywood?) Similarly, what had once been a quasi-secret film tradition of gays and lesbians slowly metamorphosed into the New Queer Cinema. Not only could these films be shown but they could be *promoted* as queer, right in public—although very often that public was assumed in advance to be limited and self-defined.

As much as I've admired some of Vachon's films, I feel my sympathies are more populist than hers. Call it a legacy of the old, old left to *The Nation*'s film culture, but when I see a picture I like, I want *everyone* to watch it. Is it the hourlong, structuralist confession of a lesbian artist about her screwed-up father, shot in black-and-white with a score by Franz Schubert? Then open it on 300 screens, on May 8! Throw it up on a Jumbotron in Times Square! Failure is not acceptable—because once we grow comfortable with the notion that a good film won't reach many people, we might as well consign our politics to a niche market, too.

I think of the comments of filmmaker David Riker, maker of *La Ciudad*, as recorded in John Anderson's book *Sundancing*. Riker was one of the dozens of people whom Anderson spoke to at the 1999 Sundance—directors, actors, distributors, critics, volunteers, policemen, civilian moviegoers—all of whom contribute to a thoroughly entertaining collage portrait of the festival. Among these, Riker is one of the

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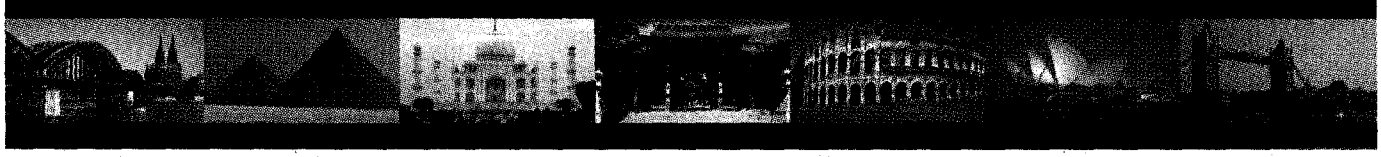

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most articulate, politically responsible and (just slightly) self-righteous. He's also one of those who have their priorities straight.

Of the marketing push at Sundance, he says, "It's a terrible experience, from the beginning to the end.... And I know what's going to happen—or it already has happened—is that there's a negative impact on the work being produced." But he also knows why he's made *La Ciudad* and what kind of payoff he wants from it. "We expected thirty people," he says of a screening held at a church; "we had over a hundred...and the response that I had personally has been incredible. For the last four days wherever I've been going, people have been recognizing me and talking about the experience of the film."

What can we do for the Rikers of this world, we who are neither filmmakers nor film financiers? We can seek out their work, certainly. We can praise what's praiseworthy while letting the rest, or most of it, pass in silence. And we can refuse to let their films' reception be limited in advance, even by the seemingly praiseworthy category of "indie."

What Jean-Luc Godard said, all those years ago, is still true today. Everything remains to be done. ■

Eyeless in Ramallah

SHALOM GOLDMAN

The Arab-Israeli peace process, which seemed solidly on track only a few months ago, has derailed. On the Syrian-Israeli front, the talks at Shepherdstown, in which the Clinton Administration put so much hope, collapsed in January and seem unlikely to reconvene any time soon. The escalating rhetoric between Israel and Syria and the parallel escalation of exchanges of fire between Hezbollah guerrillas and the Israeli Army signal an end to this phase of the projected peace settlement. On the Palestinian-Israeli front, a similar sense of gloom had settled over the stalled negotiations until their recent revival by the Clinton Administration. Each side is blaming the other for its failure to implement the Oslo accords and move ahead to final-status negotiations. Against this background of political and military escalation it is remarkable that the first Israeli-Palestinian film festival took place in February. Dubbed "Basic Trust: The International Human Rights Film Festival," the weeklong cinema and lecture series was held at three sites: Ramallah, Tel Aviv and Nazareth.

Encouraged by the fall of the Netanyahu government and the election of Ehud Barak, last year a group of Arab and Jewish artists and activists sought ways to encourage a mild cultural thaw in the frozen, often poisonous, atmosphere of Israeli-Palestinian relations. Co-produced plays, co-edited literary journals and evenings of attempted dialogue between intellectuals were among the results. The bold idea of producing such a festival came from Osnat Trabelsi, a Tel Aviv activist and artist who was inspired by the Amnesty International Film Festival in Amsterdam two years ago.

Both Trabelsi and co-organizer Daoud Kuttab of East Jerusalem's Al-Quds University emphasized that they kept the festival free of any governmental support so they would "have the freedom to showcase films that would otherwise not have been screened." It is true that there was no support from either the Israeli government or the Palestinian Authority, but other governments did contribute to this difficult-to-organize-and-produce event, including the Japanese, who have supported cultural and educational initiatives in the cities and villages under the control of the Palestinian Authority, and the British Council, which runs libraries and cultural centers throughout the Middle East. The New Israel Fund, a group that supports activities in Israel promoting Jewish-Arab coexistence, also provided aid. The complete set of forty films was shown in both Tel Aviv and Ramallah, the cultural centers of Israel and Palestine, respectively. In Nazareth, cultural center of Israeli Arabs, a shortened one-day program was presented. But despite careful planning and very good intentions, the festival had some rocky moments and a dangerous finale that made local headlines.

About a third of the films, which hailed from around the world, dealt with Arab-Israeli and other Middle Eastern issues (yes, there are other Middle Eastern issues!). Many were from Africa and Asia, some from Latin America. Among those that I saw during the festival week, two stood out,

Shalom Goldman teaches in the Middle Eastern studies department of Emory University and is now visiting professor at Tel Aviv University.

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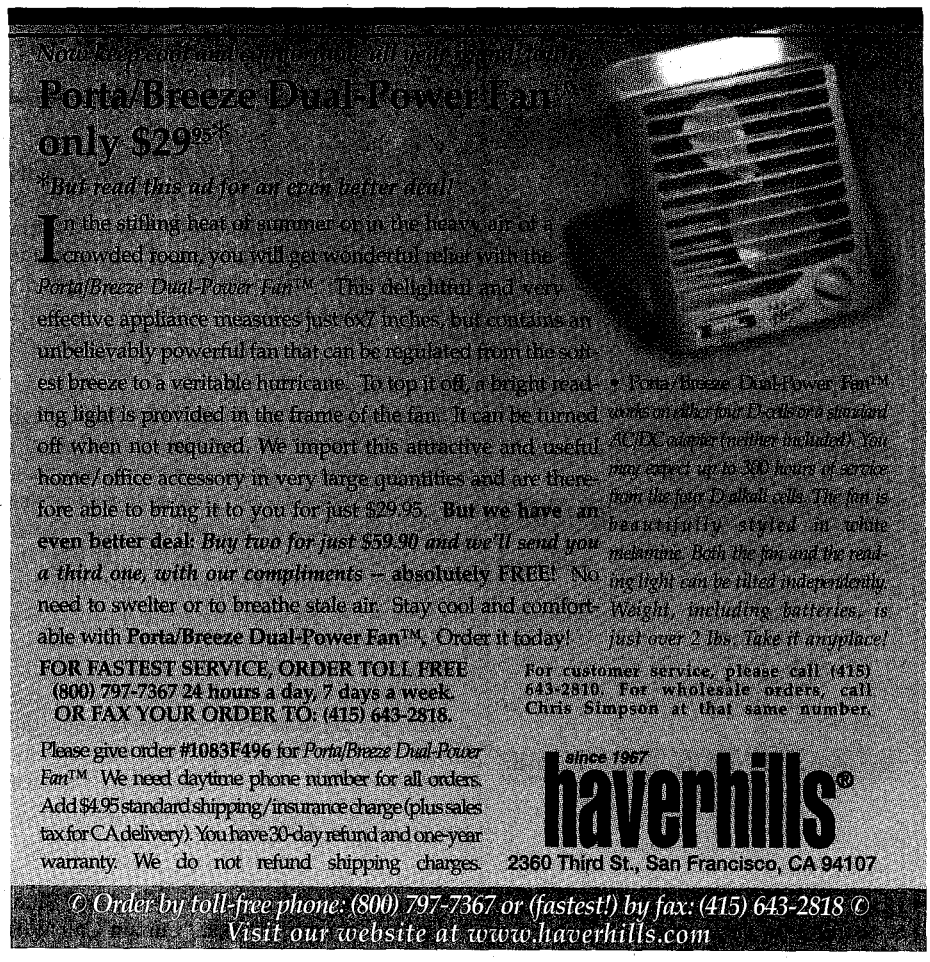
and neither touched directly on the Arab-Israeli issues at stake in the present diplomatic negotiations. Most moving was director Amalia Margolin's feature *Aharon Cohen's Debt*. The story of an Israeli citizen wrongly imprisoned in a Jerusalem jail, it brought to mind—and to the mind's eye—Hitchcock's powerful 1956 film *The Wrong Man*.

Dutch director Frank Diamond presented his documentary on the 1988 plebiscite in Chile, *Before, During, After*. Watching it while Gen. Augusto Pinochet's fate was being decided in London was a gripping experience. This screening, along with many others, was followed by a discussion with the director. Diamond's descriptions of filming under the eye of the Chilean police and secret service was one of many testimonials from directors and camera operators who produced films at their peril. Unfortunately, the festival, in all three of its locations, failed to attract many viewers. At many screenings it seemed that most of the crowd was made up of producers, directors, publicity people and a small group of dedicated leftists, for whom attendance was a political act of conscience. When I asked Amalia Margolin why more people hadn't attended the festival, she said that "most people here are fed up with serious issues. What they want is entertainment."

Those who attended the final evening of the festival in Ramallah, for which a closing ceremony was planned, may not have been entertained, but they were frightened and disturbed as they witnessed the problems that beset this attempt at "truth and reconciliation" between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs: As the festival attendees and organizers gathered at the Evangelical Church for the selection of the winning films, they were met by a demonstration by young Palestinian supporters of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a group that rejects the Oslo accords. Shouting slogans against "normalization" with the Israelis, they prevented the organizers from entering the building. A standoff ensued. When the governor of Ramallah, Mustafa Liftawi, appeared at the church, he declared the festival over and forbade the use of the public space. In a postfestival interview, organizer Kuttab called the breakup of the closing ceremonies "intellectual terrorism." A few days later Israeli journalist Amira Hess, who lives in Ramallah, pointed out a tragic irony: "The demonstrators complained that it's not the place of Israelis to teach them about human rights.... It never seemed to occur to them that this time the Israelis came to learn from them." ■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faculty on how to work with gay youth. It also funded the creation of a zine for gay, lesbian, bisexual, questioning and queer youth. This zine increases the understanding of homosexuality and ultimately shows that being straight and being gay are not all that different.

KATIE MCCALL

Lee, Mass.

■ Thank you so much for "Gay Teens Fight Back," about the fear gay youth face in school—and particularly for the stories of courageous young people who are working to change that. As a parent and active participant in Massachusetts' Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students, I know that countless kids are still the targets of verbal and physical abuse—from other youth, from teachers and administrators, from their communities of faith and, perhaps saddest of all, from their own parents. You are to be congratulated for educating your readers with a thoughtful, comprehensive article.

JUDITH A. NARDACCI

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Hillsborough, N.C.

■ John Leonard's rich overview of Studs Terkel's amazing works, "Curtain Call With Terkel" [Dec. 13], recalled to mind a wonderful moment some twenty years ago. I was in Chicago with Mike Clark, the successor to Myles Horton as director of the Highlander Center. Since Studs was a longtime supporter of that impressive grassroots school in East Tennessee, we stopped by his radio studio to say hello. And since it was midafternoon we soon found ourselves in a booth at his favorite watering hole.

While Studs regaled us with stories, a middle-aged man at the bar eyed us, then finally built up his nerve to approach. "Excuse me for interrupting, Mr. Terkel," he said in a plaintive tone. "You don't know me, but I listen to you on the radio, and I need to ask you an important question, just one question." "Sure," Studs replied, "fire away." "Mr. Terkel," the man asked in an earnest voice: "Will you be my father?"

Flicking his cigar for emphasis, Studs focused his friendly gaze on the questioner. "Yes," he replied to the stranger. "Yes, I can do that." "Thanks, Mr. Terkel," the relieved man answered as he turned away smiling. "That's all I needed to know."

PETER H. WOOD

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Re Karen Houppert's March 13 "The Meaning of Life": It is already possible to ban third-trimester abortions *except when the life or health of the woman is threatened.*

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TECHNICAL-SUPPORT SPECIALIST. RESPONSIBILITIES: Support an NT and Novell environment, which comprises approximately 200 stations. The network is migrating to a complete NT network with a concentration on Microsoft applications such as MS Exchange, Outlook, OfficePro and SQL. The candidate must demonstrate good troubleshooting skills and will be responsible for host connectivity, printing and applications access, installations, backup and recovery, user add-ons, authentication, maintenance, configuration, upgrades for servers and workstations, computer repair, including breaks/fixes, desktop support and consumer service. Qualifications: Minimum 3 years in NT/Novell LAN/WAN environment, using MS Office, Exchange w/Outlook, knowledge of TCP/IP, RAS and FTP, strong Windows NT diagnostics skills, excellent communications and interpersonal skills. Requirements: BA/BS degree. NT and Novell experience on servers and workstations. Must know how to set up a workstation on the network. Printer setup and troubleshooting experience. Provide access to shared network resources. Determine and acquire proper device drivers. Help-desk support. Diagnose and resolve device and software problems. Must be skilled in adding users to the network, etc. Experience in network hardware technologies and server troubleshooting, TCP/IP. Hubs, routers, switches. SQL Server, Exchange, MCSE, CAN, A+ certifications are all pluses. Please fax résumé and cover letter with salary requirements to MIS Director at (212) 261-2347.

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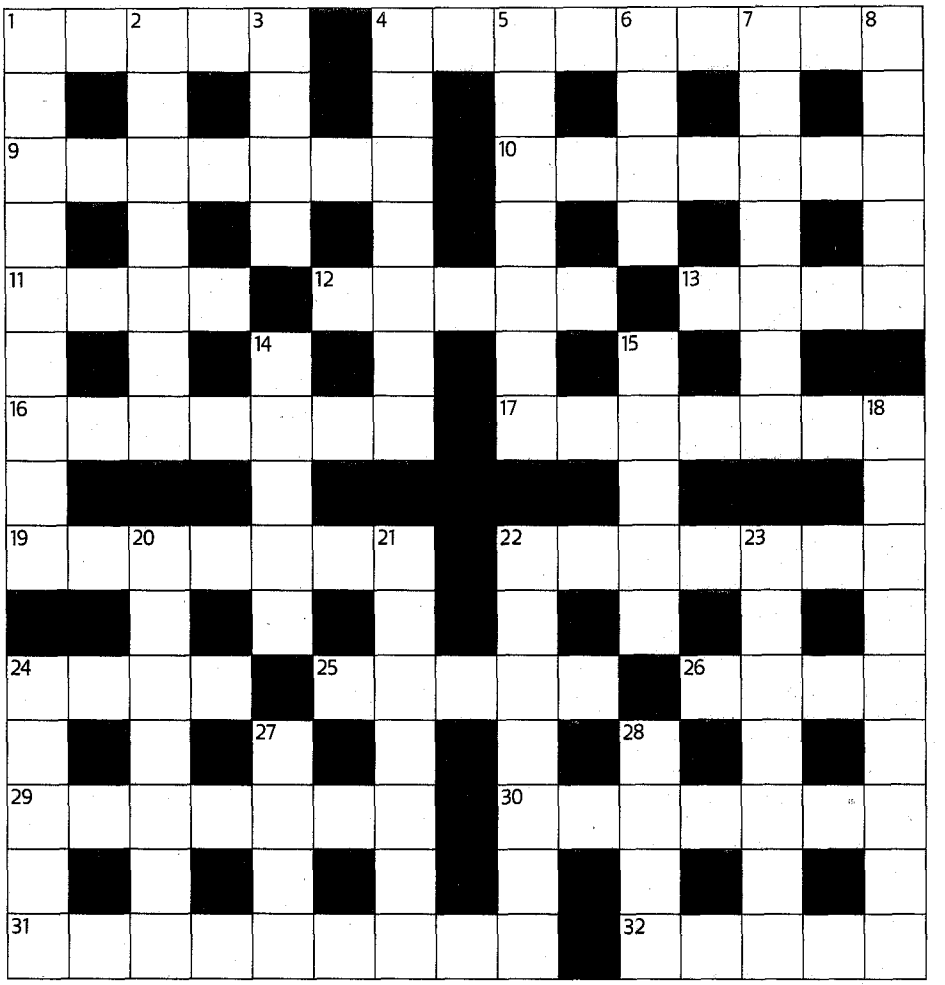

ACROSS

1 and **4** Providence might shelter such, even though a professed communist, but one should be good for a meal at least. (5,6,3)

9 In vain one is indisposed to be the heavy type. (7)

10 One doesn't necessarily plan other than an upright type so well. (7)

11, 25 and **13** Lots of water the top man, in short, has reposed on? Yes, a good deal of water! (4,9)

12 Put your foot down, and put this where it can be canceled! (5)

13 See 11

16 Redoing what could be overlooked? (7)

17 In a state where one has to be shown to be Thomas, perhaps—alias Ed. (7)

19 Those who give marks to show what might be used to put things on the level. (7)

22 Fish indeed get put into a plain form! (7)

24 and **27** down Cast aspersions on one who sounds like the first victim, which is pretty awful! (8)

25 See 11

26 Like one article or a lot of land? (4)

29 Nominally this should come two months earlier. (7)

30 Takes the so-called track back to confuse Ron in Italy. (7)

31 and **32** Dishes out the food correctly? Some say you asked for it! (6,3,5)

DOWN

1 and **24** Where sometimes people go around together headed in different directions. (9,5)

2 Butters up the relatives in order to get rainwear? (7)

3 It's a rough lane that leads to such impetuous ardor! (4)

4 Who says dieting is wrong? (Do you get lit this way?) (7)

5 One of them might be considered 14. (7)

6 Early boat builder—some say he used hickory bark. (4)

7 Number 3 on the table at the Communist Party? (3,4)

8 and **18** Over and over from dawn to dusk! (3,2,3,3,3)

14 See 28

15 Perhaps a ukase could be cited this way. (5)

18 See 8

20 With the beginning of the morning, what occasionally gets read keeps you currently informed. (7)

21 This might imply the movement should be pretty fast. (7)

22 Half down when the old measure comes up with the old producer. (7)

23 His, roughly, is in drag—but could be cleaner, in a sense. (7)

24 See 1

27 See 24 across

28 and **14** Always inexperienced, but might imply a seasonable growth. (9)

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 2746

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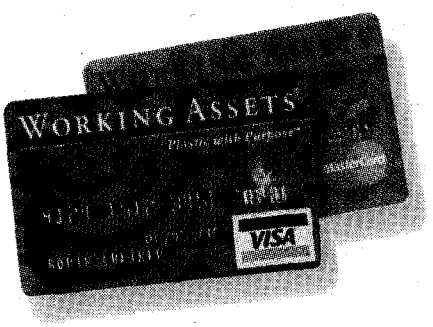

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